

## Wolf Willow (*chalef changeant*)

The Wolf Willow (*Elaeagnus commutate*) is also called the Silver Willow, Buffalo Willow, Rosary bush or Silverberry. The silvery sheen of this shrub is common throughout the prairies on road allowances, coulees, cutbanks and hillsides. It grows three to six feet in height and sometimes grows eight to ten feet. When the winter comes and the leaves have fallen off, the silver berries continue to stand out against the white snow and the blue prairie skies. The flowers are very fragrant; and the beautiful striped seeds are popular in the Prairies for making necklaces. Though commonly called Wolf Willow, this plant species is not a willow at all. Instead, it belongs to the Elaeagnaceae (Oleaster) family and is related to thorny and Canada buffaloberry (*Shepherdia*).

### Decorative Arts:

Dyed or left natural, the wolf willow seeds were sewn onto clothing or strung together as jewellery. The natural stripes of the wolf willow seeds are enhanced by the use of beads. Wolf Willow pointed seeds are dried and used as beads. When they dry they have distinctive horizontal white stripes. The Metis use these as beads to make Rosaries, bracelets and necklaces.



Wolf Willow necklaces made by Mary Conway, Turtle Mountain Local, MMF Southwest Region, and Lawrie Barkwell, St. Norbert Parish—La Barrière Metis Council.

For centuries Aboriginal North Americans have used the seeds for decoration. The seeds are usually gathered in the fall after the first frost. The outer shell or husk is removed by rubbing between the hands. The hard seed is then soaked in water and rubbed with a tool

or finger nail until the white striped markings running the length of the seed are visible. The seeds can then be boiled to soften them to allow a hole to be pushed through lengthwise. These are then strung alternately with colored beads to form a necklace. This is an example of a very traditional Aboriginal art form that is still made today. When the first settlers arrived, the women quickly learned the art from the Aboriginal women, and wolf willow seed necklaces became a popular gift to send home.

#### Medicinal Uses:

The fruit of the Wolf Willow is a rich source of vitamins and a source of fatty acids. It is rich in vitamins A, C and E. The fruit of the Wolf Willow is being investigated as a food that reduces the incidence of cancer and may even halt or reverse the growth of some cancers. A decoction of the bark mixed with oil is used as a salve for children with frostbite. A decoction of wolf willow and sumac roots has been used for syphilis; however, this mixture is quite poisonous and usually causes sterility. The essential oil is in demand for aromatherapy.

#### Food Uses:

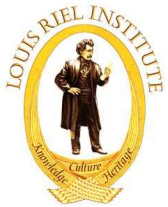
Wolf Willow fruit is mealy and dry, but was still eaten by some Metis and First Nations people. In yesteryear, they peeled and ate the berries or mixed them with grease and stored them in a cool place. This was eaten as a confection or added to soups and broths; it was also used as a jelly. The berries were sometimes mixed with blood or sugar and cooked for food.

#### Other Uses:

The fibrous bark of this bush is used in weaving for blankets and clothing. It can be twisted to form a strong rope. The berries are used to make soap.

The bark was used to make strong fiber baskets useful for collecting berries. Bark was also used to make cordage. Aboriginal children braided the bark of the silverberry into short ropes for a winter game. A child would set a stone on ice and wind the bark rope around the stone, pull the stone quickly and cause the stone to spin like a top.

Native people discovered the bush had a bad smell when burned and because of its connection to Rosaries they refrain from using it as firewood. Those who used it for firewood were often chided for being lazy.



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