



## Mountain Loop Conservancy Fact Sheet:

### Salal *Gaultheria shallon*

**Range:** Salal grows only in North America and ranges from southeastern Alaska south to central California and east through the western slopes of the coastal ranges and Cascade Mountains. Salal grows from sea level to an elevation of 2,500 feet (763 m).

**Identification:** This shrub grows to a height of 1.3 to 10 feet (0.4 - 3 m). Its evergreen leaves are thick, leathery, and shiny. Leaves are a pointed egg shape and are 2 - 4 inches (5 - 10cm) long. The green leaves grow alternately off stems that are often reddish in color. The lantern-shaped flowers are white to pinkish in color and grow along the ends of stems in showy clusters of 5 -15. They bloom from May 15 - July 1. Salal has a “pseudo berry” that is actually fleshy flower sepals. The berries are 0.24 - 0.4 inch (6 - 10mm) in diameter and reddish-blue to dark purple in color. They are covered with tiny hairs. The fruit is edible and is ripe by August 15. The berries taste a little like huckleberries but they are sweeter and have a drier texture.



Salal with berries. Photo by Angie Goodloe ©

**Unique characteristics:** This is one of the most common understory plant species in the Pacific Northwest. Salal varies widely in height depending on where they are growing. Their growth can be a low, scraggly form or a tall, almost impenetrable, thicket.

**Habitat:** Salal grows in a wide variety of habitats from coastal dunes to montane forests. It can grow in dry to very wet sites and tolerates sun or shade. It can be a dominant understory plant in Douglas-fir, Hemlock - Sitka spruce, Redwood, and Western hardwood ecosystems within its range. It is also found in forests dominated by lodgepole pine, western redcedar, tanoak, and Pacific silver fir. It is associated with numerous plant species including, ferns, pearly everlasting, huckleberries, rhododendron, Oregon grape, oceanspray, alder, and Pacific madrone.



Roosevelt elk browse on salal shrubs ©

**Value to wildlife:** Salal is eaten by many animal species. Black-tailed deer, mule deer, and elk browse on this shrub. Salal is a favored food of mountain beaver in parts of its range. Other mammals that feed on the fruit include red squirrel, Townsend's chipmunk, Douglas' squirrel, and black bear. Ruffed, spruce, and blue grouse and band-tailed pigeon eat the berries. Many species of songbirds feed on the fruit when available. Hummingbirds feed on the flowers.

**Commercial value:** Foliage from salal is frequently used in floral arrangements. The long-lasting leaves form a beautiful background for colorful flowers. Florists refer to it as “lemon leaf”. Salal is also sold as a landscaping shrub. The berries are eaten fresh or in jams, preserves, syrups, and pies. They are also made into wine. Herbalists occasionally use it to treat bladder inflammation.

**Historical uses:** The fruit from salal was one of the most important foods of coastal Native Americans and First Peoples. Berries were dried and eaten fresh. Fresh berries were often mixed with other berries and traded or sold. Salal berries were dipped in oolichan grease during large feasts. Sometimes the berries were used as a sweetener. Fish soup was flavored using salal branches and leaves.

Salal was used medicinally in several ways. It was used as a laxative and a stomach tonic. Young leaves were used as a hunger suppressant. Native people used it as an all-purpose herbal astringent. Chewed leaves were applied to burns. Tea made from the leaves was used to treat heartburn, coughs, and tuberculosis.

Leaves and branches were used for additional purposes. Leaves were used to make a greenish-yellow dye and were mixed with salmon roe to make paint. The branches were used as beaters for soapberries. Dried leaves were mixed with kinnikinnick and smoked. A single leaf was folded into a cone to form a cup.



Lewis and Clark collected salal near Fort Clatsop in the winter of 1806. On February 6, 1806, Captain William Clark noted, "The Shallon is the production of a shrub which I have heretofore taken to be a species of loral and mentioned as abounding in this neighbourhood and that the Elk fed much on it's leaves." He described being served a salal berry syrup and soup made by the local Chinook tribe. "In the eveng an old woman presented a bowl made of a light Coloured horn a kind of Surup made of Dried berries which is common to this Country which the natives Call *Shele wele* this Surup I thought was pleasant, they Gave me Cockle Shells to eate a kind of Seup (soup) made of bread of the *Shele well* berries mixed with roots ...". Meriwether Lewis described how loaves

were made from the fruit in this passage, "...very frequently they pound them and bake them in large loaves of 10 or fifteen pounds; this bread keeps very well during one season and retains the moist jeucies of the fruit..." Lewis and Clark noted that salal was highly prized as a food source by the native people.

Botanist David Douglas was very impressed with salal. When he arrived at Cape Disappointment in 1825 and made his first observations, he wrote, "On stepping on the shore *Gaultheria Shallon* was the first plant I took in my hands. So pleased was I that I could scarcely see anything but it". He tried to promote growing it for its berries but was not successful. In 1828, Douglas introduced salal as an ornamental landscaping plant in England.

**Interesting Fact:** In the Nitinaht tribe of Vancouver Island, both newlywed husband and wife ate the leaves because they thought that would increase the chances of their firstborn child being a boy.

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