

THE CONCORD HISTORIAN

"PRESERVING THE PAST TO PROTECT THE FUTURE"

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A TASTE OF HISTORY? LET'S FIND OUT

By Glenn Anaiscourt

Our state is abloom this season, and among the wildflowers in our area are red maids. These are plants with small blossoms that love disturbed soil. We don't know how people referred to red maids here in Bay Miwok country before the Spanish arrival, but in the related Northern Sierra Miwok language the word seems to have been *coacha*. So it was probably something similar to that here, too.

The grassy slopes of Mount Diablo are still home to two species of red maids, so you might have seen them. If so, you're ahead of me, but either way this is a plant we should all know about, because red maids are an important part of our history.

For thousands of years, the flower fields were like a grocery store for people living in our neck of the woods, and red maids were among the most important items of the "shelves." We have surely all heard about acorn consumption. Many of us have probably tried accord porridge or bread ourselves. Acorn processing is a fairly recent development, though. While people have been present for well over 10,000 years in California, the processing of acorns into flour didn't even begin to ramp up until about 2,500 BCE. There is long evidence, however, for the consumption of numerous other seeds. One reason must be that unlike acorns, the seeds and greens of such plants as red maids require far less processing to eat.

Red maids are among those plants that increase dramatically after a wildfire comes through. The fire adds nutrients to the soil and decreases competition from grasses, so these "fire-loving" plants become abundant. People who wanted to eat red maids used to set fires intentionally, then, to encourage them along.

Materials on this topic say that the shiny, black seeds of red maids were "delightfully edible," and that they were valued

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CALANDRINIA CILIATA (REDMAIDS)



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for their oiliness. Here where we live, people collected them in the early summer and spread them out at home. After winnowing, they either parched the red maids seeds or stored them fresh to dry in baskets. Then they ground the seeds into an oily meal to form balls and cakes. There is more on this in such resources as *Miwok Material Culture* by Barrett and Gifford, available online and in libraries.

Adjacent to us, Yokuts-speaking people loved red maids too, popping the seeds “like candy” (Gayton, 1948), and apparently the young greens of red maids tasted like arugula and were good raw or cooked.

But ... is it true?

As we gaze at the wildflowers, we know we are enjoying a sights that people have appreciated here for thousands of years. If we went ahead and ate red maids, though, would they really taste “like candy?” I’m not sure, but one thing I can say is that this particular topic has made me feel hungry.

Many of us history lovers don’t just want to hear about the past. We want to sample it. We want to recline in the century-old wicker chair. We want to drive the Model-T Ford. We want to try those horehound sweets, and hear the great “bongs” of a grandfather clock every, single waking hour of our lives, don’t we?

Today, nearly everything available can be obtained through the internet, and as it happens there is an online company from which one may obtain red maids seeds for planting. So here beside me now sits a packet of these choacha—of these *calandrinia ciliata*—and the plan is to plant them, watch them grow, and see if they taste like candy, arugula, or something entirely different.

Perhaps reading this has made you feel hungry too. If sampling red maids sounds like a tasty idea and you would like to join in this venture to better understand our past, then give me a shout at ganaiscourt@gmail.com and lets see what we can accomplish together.

Will it work? Will our hunger be satisfied? Let’s stay tuned ...

