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CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT  
**PLANTS**  
OF THE CHICKASAW  
**HOMELAND**

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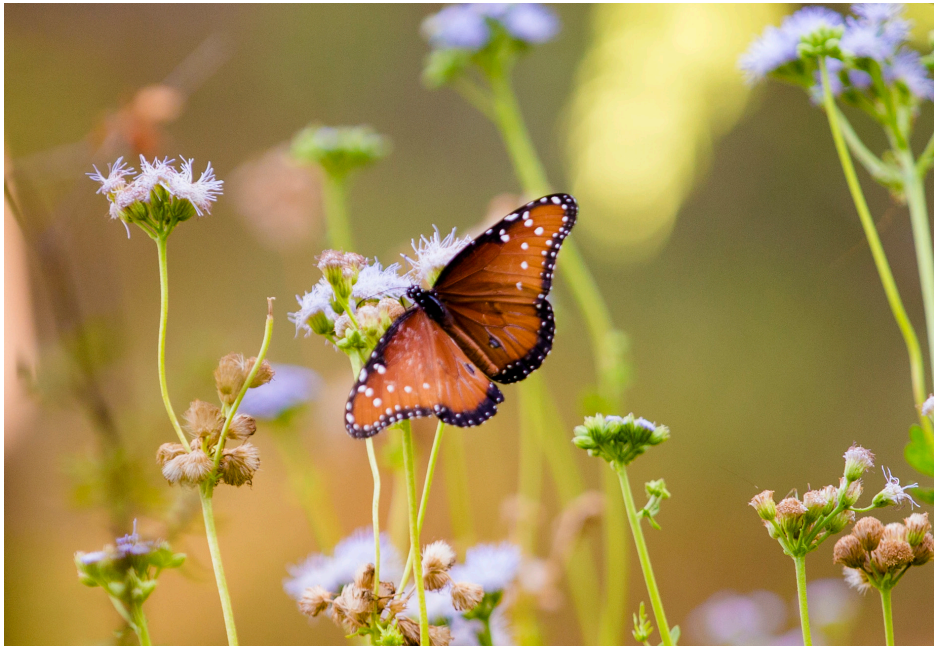


## CHOKMA!

The ancient **CHICKASAW HOMELAND** was once scattered across the forests, mountains and prairies that later became parts of southwestern Kentucky, western Tennessee, northern Mississippi and northwestern Alabama. The Chickasaw Nation is committed to preserving and protecting Chickasaw history and culture in the Homeland, including many plants our ancestors made use of in their daily lives. This brochure describes the efforts made to protect these plants and how each was vital to the Chickasaw way of life. By remembering and understanding the relationship between our ancestors and their natural environment, we strive to honor their memory and maintain a strong sense of Chickasaw cultural identity in our communities.

**SINCERELY,**

**BILL ANOATUBBY, GOVERNOR  
THE CHICKASAW NATION**



The original **CHICKASAW HOMELAND** contained many plants that our ancestors used for food, medicine, clothing and shelter. Some of those plants can still be found in the Homeland and retain much of their usefulness for similar purposes. Several of the original Chickasaw village sites, in what is currently Tupelo, Mississippi, were located on or near portions of the Blackland Prairie. The Blackland Prairie is a fertile geological environment with dark, rich soil conducive to wild plant growth, consisting of grassland prairies interspersed with hardwood forests.



## MILKWEED – ASCLEPIAS SPP.

The name “MILKWEED” comes from the milky latex that exudes when a milkweed plant is wounded. Coming into contact with the latex can cause skin irritation and allergic reaction in some people and deter animals from eating the plant. Milkweed has been used in traditional Southeastern Indian foods. When prepared properly, leaves, flower buds, young shoots and seedpods are edible. Historically, the stems were also used to make nets and basketry.

- **Green Antelopehorn, milkweed – *Asclepias viridis***  
All plants in the genus *Asclepias* are toxic to some humans and animals. The sap can cause skin irritation in humans. Children are most vulnerable because of size and age.

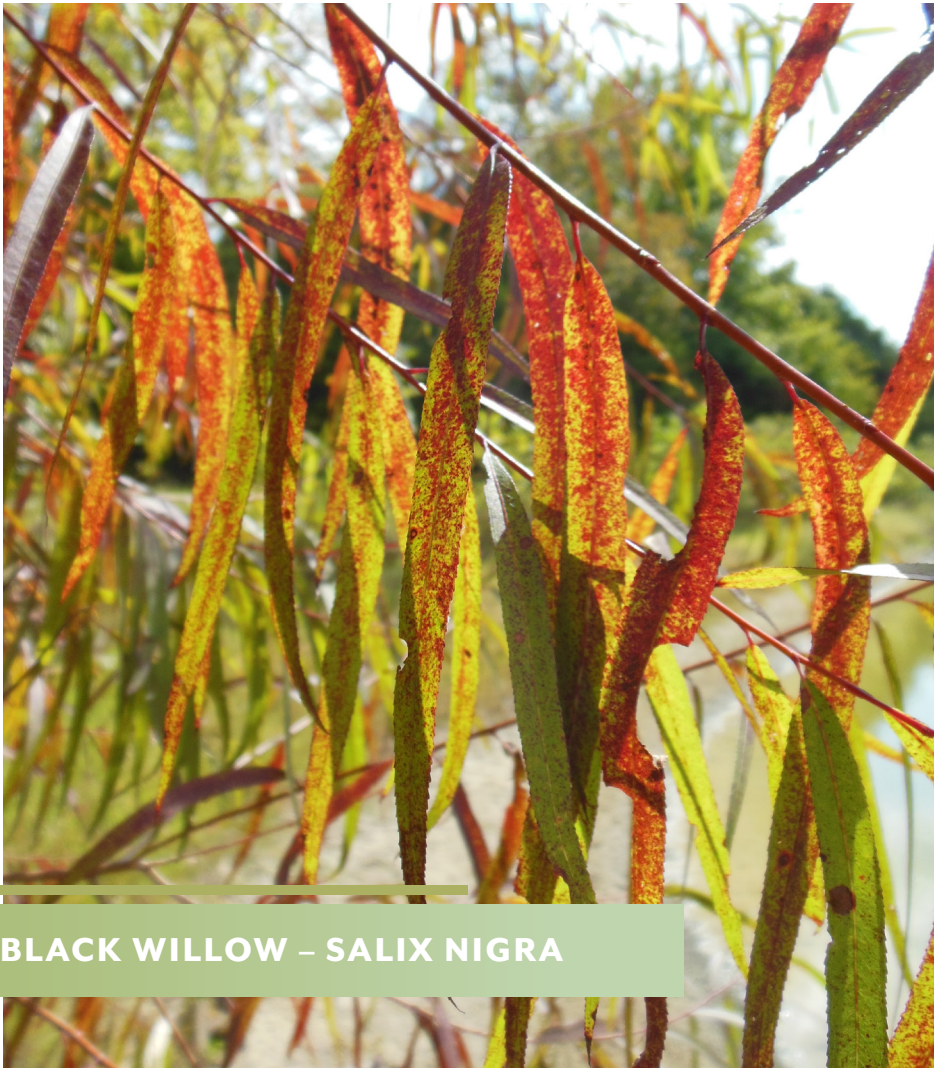
- **Butterfly Weed – *Asclepias tuberosa***

This bright orange perennial grows in prairies, open woods and hillsides. Fresh root was chewed to relieve bronchitis, and tea was made of the root for stomach ailments. Because of this, the plant was given another common name: pleurisy root. Fresh root was chewed to relieve bronchitis and tea was made of the root for stomach ailments.

## POSSUM GRAPES – VITIS SPP.

**POSSUM GRAPES** may refer to several different native grape varieties and grow long vines with loose clusters of tiny purple, blue or pink grapes. They grow best in direct sunlight and may grow many feet up the trunk and along the branches of tall trees or on fence lines. Possum grape seeds are relatively large. The grapes are collected for their juice, particularly for flavoring traditional grape dumplings.





## BLACK WILLOW – SALIX NIGRA

**BLACK WILLOW** is a moderately tall tree with slender branches and beneficial medicinal properties. Its bark and roots contain the compound salicin, which was used historically to treat pain, fever and inflammation; salicin was the pre-cursor to modern aspirin. Black willow is sacred to Chickasaws and is used for many cultural purposes, including constructing brush arbors.



## AMERICAN PERSIMMON – DIOSPYROS VIRGINIANA

**AMERICAN PERSIMMON** trees grow throughout the United States and can reach up to 66 feet tall. They produce a medium-sized, fleshy, orange or bluish fruit that can be sweet once fully ripened, but begin as astringent. The fruit are still eaten today by humans and wild animals, such as white-tail deer. Southeastern Indian tribes have used the strong wood and delicious fruit of persimmon trees since prehistory. Southeastern Indians ate the fruit in the cold, winter months. The bark was used intermittently as an astringent, antiseptic and tonic. Infusion of the fruit was used as a syrup for sore throats. Several tribes used the fruit as a food source and as a remedy for many mouth, throat and stomach problems.

## WILD ONION – ALLIUM SPP.

**WILD ONION** grows throughout the United States and has been used as a Southeastern Indian traditional food for generations. Wild onions can vary from a few inches to a couple of feet high.







## FEVERWORT – TRIOSTEUM SPP.

**FEVERWORT** is a small plant that derives its name from historic medicinal practices. It produces small, orange fruit at the base of its leaves next to the central plant stem. Its roots were used to treat fever and pain or to induce vomiting. It can be found in low, well-drained soils near gullies.

## SMOOTH SUMAC – RHUS GLABRA

**SMOOTH SUMAC** is a medium-sized shrub with edible berries and is the only shrub or tree species native to all 48 contiguous states. It provides an excellent escape and nesting ground cover for wildlife. Although it shares its name with poison sumac, it is not toxic. Smooth sumac's clusters of small, red fruit can be processed and added to water to produce a citrus-like drink similar to lemonade. In addition to being edible, its berries were used to treat skin blisters and stomach problems or added to tobacco for smoking. Almost the entire shrub can be used to make dye for tanning leather.





## RESURRECTION FERN – PLEOPELTIS POLYPODIOIDES



**RESURRECTION FERN** is a form of epiphytic fern native to the Chickasaw Homeland. It can lose up to 75 percent of its water content and still survive. During a period of dryness, this plant shrivels into a brown clump of leaves. When it rains, however, the plant springs back, thus the name “resurrection fern.”



## HICKORY – CARYA SPP.

**HICKORY** trees usually grow 60 - 100 feet tall and yield large, oval nuts with hard, thick hulls. Hickory was used by many tribes as a food source, a poultice for cuts and a remedy for pain and stomach problems. Hickory ash was sometimes used to make lye to remove the hulls from dry, whole corn for pashofa. Hickory's strong wood is valued for making bows, stickball sticks and other wooden tools.

## OAK TREE (POST OAK) – QUERCUS STELLATA

**POST OAK** is a slow-growing and long-lived tree. The acorns are an important food source for squirrels, deer, wild turkeys and other wildlife. Acorns must be treated before human consumption due to the high tannin content. Southeastern Indians had many ways to treat the acorns to be able to eat them including boiling many times, hanging them in porous sacks in running streams for weeks or burying them in boggy ground over the winter to bring out the tannins. Settlers used the acorns roasted or as a tea and coffee substitute.





## AMERICAN LOTUS – NELUMBO LUTEA (SACRED BEAN YELLOW)

**AMERICAN LOTUS** is a perennial plant native to North America. American lotus served as a primary food source for our pre-agricultural ancestors, and we continued to use the seed, stalks and large tuberous roots, raw or cooked, as a food throughout our history. The seeds provided essential oils and fats, while the starchy tubers provided carbohydrates for energy. The root can be used to create a red dye.

## YAUPON HOLLY – ILEX VOMITORIA

**YAUPON HOLLY** is a medium to large shrub with evergreen leaves and a long history of cultural use. Yaupon holly is one of the few North American plants that produces caffeine naturally, and one of its most important uses was a tea infused from its leaves. During the Mississippian period, Chickasaw ancestors consumed its tea for strength during battles or social activities. It was ingested in large amounts to induce vomiting and purge the body of toxins.





## BROADLEAF CATTAIL – TYPHA LATIFOLIA

**CATTAIL** is a perennial herbaceous plant native to most of the world. It is a nutritious plant and has been collected by many cultures. Cattail produces more starch per acre than potatoes, rice or yams. The entire plant is edible and contains high amounts of vitamins A, B, C, potassium and phosphorus and was processed by our ancestors in a variety of ways by boiling and cooking.

## SQUASH – CUCURBITA SPP.

**SQUASH** has been used by Southeastern Indians since ancient times and includes several different kinds of squash, pumpkins and gourds. Together, with other early plants such as goosefoot and sumpweed, squash formed what anthropologists call the Eastern Agricultural Complex, a set of crops raised during early North American agriculture. Squash was eaten directly after harvest or preserved as a food source during winter. Squash is still important to Chickasaws today and can be seen growing in the Chickasaw Preserve's Three Sisters Garden, where it provides ground cover to conserve water in the soil and reduce weed growth.





## EASTERN REDCEDAR – JUNIPERUS VIRGINIANA

**EASTERN REDCEDAR** is an aromatic tree native to most of eastern North America. Known by many Mississippian tribes as “The Tree of Life,” the Chickasaw people used the smoke of redcedar for purification prior to conducting ceremonies. Chickasaws also heated the limbs in hot water and applied topically for headaches.

## BLACKBERRY – RUBUS TRIVIALIS

**BLACKBERRIES** have been used by Southeastern Indians for a number of illnesses, including upset stomach, swollen tissue and joints and sore throats. Chewing on the leaves soothed bleeding gums and strengthened the whole immune system. Fiber obtained from the stem was used to make strong twine, rope and bedding. Purple or dull blue dye was obtained from the fruit and used for basketry and clothing.





## BALD CYPRESS – TAXODIUM DISTICHUM

**BALD CYPRESS** and other cypress species have been used by Southeastern Indians for generations as a source of wood for dugouts and other smaller tools. Bald cypress grow slowly to a large size, mostly in flooded plain swamps. Bald cypress can occasionally live for more than 1,000 years. Their large size and resistance to water make them a logical source material for dugout boats that were made by hollowing out large trunks with fire and adzes. Some bald cypress wood has survived being underwater for centuries.

## BLACK WALNUT – JUGLANS NIGRA



**BLACK WALNUT** trees grow 100-130 feet tall and produce strong wood and large brown nuts with fleshy hulls. The tree contains mildly toxic chemicals, which may have negative effects on exposed plants and animals. Tomatoes and other plants grown adjacent to a black walnut tree may be stunted by the chemicals secreted by its roots.

Nuts from black walnut trees were eaten by animals and people. Black walnuts were used to create a natural brown dye, and its wood was prized for woodworking. Historic Chickasaws bruised green black walnut hulls and submerged them in bodies of water to stun fish for easy collection.



## WILD PLUM – PRUNUS AMERICANA

**WILD PLUM**, also known as American plum or sandhill plum, is a wild plum species that grows in thickets on the edges of prairies. Southeastern Indians have used these and other wild plum species as fresh and preserved food and medicine for centuries.

## BUTTON SNAKEROOT – ERYNGIUM YUCCIFOLIUM

**BUTTON SNAKEROOT**, also called rattlesnake master, is a herbaceous perennial plant of the parsley family, native to the tall grass prairies of central and eastern North America.

They grow 2-5 feet tall with their flower heads developing a bluish cast at maturity. Southeastern tribes used them for a variety of ailments including snakebites, toothaches, bladder problems and coughs.

The seed buttons may have also been added as an emetic to the ceremonial Black Drink, which is brewed from yaupon holly.





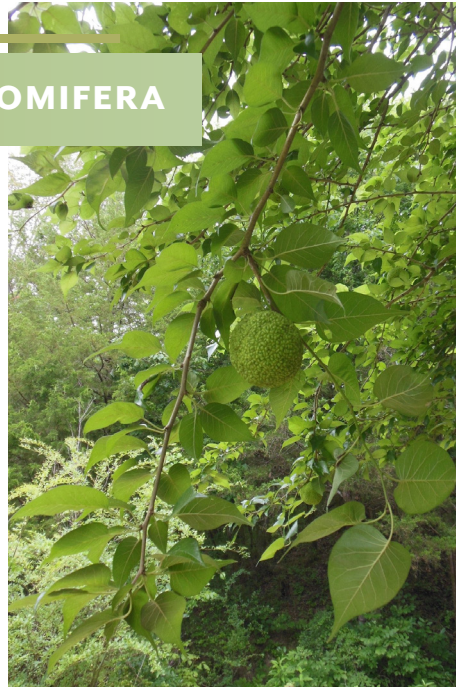


## BEAN – PHASEOLUS VULGARIS

**BEANS** have been eaten by Southeastern Indians for generations. Alongside corn and squash, beans form the three crops of Three Sisters agriculture, an ancient system of agriculture in which the plants benefit each other during crop growth and complement each other nutritionally, allowing them to be consumed together as part of a healthy plant-based diet. Recipes using beans include banaha', soups, stews and other dishes for Chickasaws today. Pole beans can be seen climbing the corn in the Preserve Three Sisters garden, where they return nitrogen to the soil after every harvest, enriching it for the next year.

## BOIS D'ARC – MACLURA POMIFERA

**BOIS D'ARC'S** bright orange wood is strong and resistant to insects and rot, making it ideal for bows and other wooden weapons and tools. It has also been used as a natural hedge, and its fruit has been studied as a natural bug repellent.





## ST. JOHN'S WORT – HYPERICUM SPP.



The flowering tops of **ST. JOHN'S WORT** are still used today to prepare teas, tablets, capsules and liquid extracts. Topical preparations are also available. The most well-known species used for these purposes, *Hypericum perforatum*, was brought to North America in the late 1600s but is now naturalized across the continent and was used by Southeastern Indians after its introduction. However, there are also many native St.

John's Wort cousin species in our Homeland, such as *H. brachyphyllum*, *H. crux andreae* (St. Peter's Wort), *H. gentianoides* (Pineweed), *H. hypericoides* (St. Andrew's Cross), *H. proflificum*, *H. punctatum* and *H. suffruticosum*. Some of these plants were used by Southeastern Indians for a wide variety of remedies, such as an analgesic, cathartic, antidiarrheal, antirheumatic, dermatological aid, eye medicine, febrifuge, gastrointestinal aid, gynecological aid, hemostat, menstrual aid, pediatric aid, snakebite remedy, strengthener, toothache remedy, urinary aid and venereal aid.

## WILD STRAWBERRY – FRAGARIA SPP.



**WILD STRAWBERRY** is a thick-leaved native perennial that is common in local forests, fields and meadows. It produces berries from April through June. There are historical accounts of the large fields full of strawberries that were regularly harvested by the Chickasaws, as well as descriptions of them hunting the large flocks of the now extinct passenger pigeon as hunters fed on the fruit.



## RIVER CANE – ARUNDINARIA GIGANTEA

**RIVER CANE** was one of the most important natural resources to our ancestors. It was used to make baskets, mats, knives, blow guns, arrow shafts, spears, flutes, fish traps, tobacco pipes and many other utilitarian items. Today, many tribes continue to pass on the traditions of basket and mat weaving as well as flute making using river cane.

## INDIAN PINK – SPIGELIA MARILANDICA

**INDIAN PINK** (Woodland pinkroot), a perennial of the Logania Family, is 12-24 inches in size. It is easily recognized by its bicolored flowers and found in rich woods, woodland edges and shaded woods. It is pollinated by bees, butterflies and hummingbirds, and grows in colonies. Many stalks may all bloom at once in May and June. The Southeastern tribes and physicians used the root to treat for worms, especially in children. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was heavily harvested and became threatened.



## GRAY-HEADED CONEFLOWER – RATIBIDA PINNATA



**GRAY-HEADED CONEFLOWER**, or yellow coneflower, is found primarily along roadsides, in prairies and is used as a wildlife cover. It grows up to 4 feet tall on a slender stem with 13 yellow, downward-pointing petals. Southeastern Indians made a tea from the cones and leaves, and the root could be used to soothe toothaches.

## PAWPAW – ASIMINA TRILOBA

**PAWPAW** (false banana, custard apple) is a small tree or shrub 9-30 feet in size. It can be found in deep, rich, moist soils along streams and bottom lands and forms dense thickets. The fruit is eaten by opossum, raccoon, fox and squirrel; the larvae of the zebra swallowtail butterfly feed exclusively on the leaves. Pawpaw was cultivated by Southeastern Indian tribes for the fruit. This cultivation is responsible for its widespread range today. The mashed fruit was used to make small cakes that were dried and stored, then later soaked in water and cooked to make a sauce or relish that was served with corn bread. Stored dried fruits were taken for food on hunts. Inner bark was used to make cordage by our ancestors.





## CHICKASAW PLUM – PRUNUS ANGUSTIFOLIA

**CHICKASAW PLUM** is a small, shrub-like tree that often grows 12-20 feet tall in thickets and produces fruit similar to others in the plum family. It is commonly referred to as stone fruit because of the hard seed inside. The fruit is eaten by deer, bear, raccoon, squirrel and birds. It is believed to have been brought to the Homeland by Chickasaws during their migration and cultivated for its fruit. Several Southeastern Indian tribes used the bright red Chickasaw Plum fruit as a food source, which was also sun dried for winter consumption.

## SUNFLOWER – HELIANTHUS ANNUUS



**SUNFLOWER** was one of the first domesticated plants and a common crop among Southeastern Indian tribes. Sunflowers complemented the squash and grains of the ancient Eastern Agricultural Complex in North America thousands of years ago. Seed was ground or pounded into flour for cakes, mush or bread. The seed was also cracked and eaten for a snack. Parts of the plant were used to treat snakebites. Dried stalks were incorporated as building material,

and the plant was sometimes used in ceremonies. Sunflowers are still eaten as a food source by Chickasaws and many peoples around the world. In addition to their seeds, sunflowers are also processed today for their oil. Sunflowers can be seen growing in the Preserve's Three Sisters Garden area alongside corn, beans, squash and a variety of wildflowers.

## RED MULBERRY – MORUS RUBRA

**RED MULBERRY** is a small tree of 20-60 feet in size. It is found in floodplains, river valleys and moist hillsides, and prefers deep, well-drained soil that is high in organic matter. It is a favored food of most birds and a number of small mammals. Fruits have been and can be used in jellies, jams, pies and drinks. Several Southeastern Indian tribes used the fruit as a food source. Parts of the tree were also used to



treat a variety of ailments such as sap to treat ringworm and tea from the leaves as a treatment for dysentery, weakness and difficulty urinating.



## GREEN DRAGON – ARISAEMA DRACONTIUM

**GREEN DRAGON** is an exotic looking plant that blooms May to June in wet, low woodlands or stream banks with neutral or basic soil. Green dragons usually have one compound leaf, but look like five to 15 leaflets in a semicircle. The plants grow from 12-36 inches high. The fruit of the green dragon can burn the mouth severely if ingested uncooked.

## CORN – ZEA MAYS

**CORN**, also known as maize, is technically a grass which has been heavily modified by human domestication over the course of millennia. About 1,000 years ago during the Mississippian period, Southeastern Indians began practicing intensive agriculture, and corn was their most important crop. Corn continued to play a significant role in the lives of Chickasaws and other tribes throughout the post-contact period, and is still culturally significant today. Corn was the focus of the busk, or Green Corn Ceremony, and it was the main ingredient in several cultural foods important to Chickasaws, namely pashofa, a hulled, cracked corn stew cooked with pork or other meats in large cauldrons over several hours. Corn is still grown by many Chickasaws today and grows prominently in the Chickasaw Preserve Three Sisters Garden, where it serves as a supporting structure for the pole beans to climb.





## PRICE'S POTATO BEAN – *APIOS PRICEANA*

**PRICE'S POTATO BEAN** is a threatened and federally protected flowering plant in the legume family. Preferring disturbed, partly sunny areas on the slopes of hills, it has never been a very common species due to its habitat preference. Currently, only 13 populations of the plant are known, and the Chickasaw Preserve has one of the largest populations in the world.



## INDIAN HEMP – APOCYNUM CANNABINUM

**INDIAN HEMP** has been used to make twine, nets and bow strings using the fibrous material from the interior bark. Its seeds have been ground as a food source and its latex sap preserved as a chewing gum. Medicinally it has been used to treat wounds and abdominal problems.



## AMERICAN BEAUTYBERRY – CALLICARPA AMERICANA

### **AMERICAN BEAUTYBERRY**

(French mulberry, American mulberry, wild goose's berries) is a shrub found in dry, open woods, moist woods and thickets, and occurs as an understory species in upland forests. It is easily recognized by the sticky, aromatic, opposite leaves and whorls of magenta fruits. The fruits are an important food source for many species of birds as well as armadillo, raccoon, wood rats, gray fox, opossum and white-tailed deer. It provides food well into the winter months when other food sources are unavailable. Southeastern Indian tribes used the leaves and branches for various medicinal purposes. Decoction (extract obtained by boiling) from different parts of the plant was used to treat dizziness, stomach aches, colic, itchy skin and urine retention or "urine stopped-up sickness," as well as in sweat baths and sweathouses to treat both malarial fever and rheumatism. It has been found to be a natural repellent to the mosquitoes which carry yellow fever and malaria, as well as the tick which carries Lyme disease.





The **CHICKASAW NATION** works to preserve, promote and interpret the existing original Homeland and Blackland Prairie plants through ecological restoration, plants introduction and interpretive trails. Chickasaw ancestors maintained the landscape by burning dormant grasses and other plants to provide villages with visibility and to renew the earth and allow important plants the chance to thrive. Regular burning was discontinued when Chickasaws left the Homeland. Today, the Chickasaw Nation works with other agencies to ensure that restorative practices continue to be applied to the landscape.



**BILL ANOATUBBY, GOVERNOR**

The Chickasaw Nation