



SWEETGRASS BRAIDING AND DANCING

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CONTENT SCOPE

Students will learn more about the significance of sweetgrass for Native peoples, particularly Plains Natives. They will develop a connection and appreciation for sweetgrass. Students will learn to braid their own sweetgrass.

FOR TEACHERS

Subject & Topic: Social Studies (Native American History) and Art

Grade Level: K-12

Lesson Time: 1 Hour Class Period

Group Size: Regular Class Size (18 - 25 students)

OBJECTIVES

STUDENTS WILL:

- Learn about the importance of Sweetgrass for Native peoples.
- Understand the significance of sweetgrass, including its uses and symbolic meanings.
- Develop hand skills by braiding the sweet grass.

MATERIALS

- Sweetgrass
- Yarn or twine
- Spray Bottles of Water (optional)



Sweetgrass Braid
Vi-o-ot's, Northern Cheyenne

WHO ARE THE PLAINS NATIVES?

The Plains Natives inhabited the vast region of North America spanning from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains and from present-day Canada to Texas. They were highly adaptable to the environment, relying on buffalo hunting, fishing, and gathering for sustenance. Tribes such as the Blackfeet, Sioux, Cheyenne, Crow, and Comanche were prominent among them. They lived in nomadic or semi-nomadic communities, following the seasonal movements of buffalo herds. Their cultures were rich and diverse, characterized by vibrant oral traditions, intricate art forms, and spiritual practices deeply connected to the environments they inhabited. The introduction of horses by Europeans in the 16th century transformed their way of life, making them even more formidable hunters and warriors. The arrival of European settlers brought significant changes and conflicts, leading to the decline of their traditional lifestyle and the loss of their lands. Today, many Plains Natives remain active in their culture and traditions while facing ongoing challenges related to social, economic, and political issues.

WHAT IS SWEETGRASS?

Sweetgrass holds profound cultural and spiritual significance for Plains Natives, particularly those of the Northern Plains region. It's a sacred plant used in various ceremonial practices, including smudging, prayer, and purification rituals. Traditionally, sweetgrass is braided before being dried and used, symbolizing the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit. Its distinctive aroma is said to evoke feelings of peace, harmony, and healing. Early Northern Plains grass dancers adorned their regalia with braided sweetgrass. In some traditions, each of the three strands are composed of seven stalks of grass, each representing one of the Seven Sacred Teachings, also known as the Seven Grandfathers: truth, humility, wisdom, honesty, courage, respect, and love.

GRASS DANCING

The Grass Dance is a traditional dance style originating from the Northern Plains tribes, such as the Sioux, Blackfeet, and Crow. Originally, Grass Dancers would be the first into the prairie to stomp down the tall grasses to prepare a circle for ceremony, but it has evolved into a competitive and social dance often seen at powwows and other cultural gatherings. It is characterized by its intricate footwork, which mimics the movement of grass blowing in the wind. The vibrant regalia are adorned with fringe, ribbons or yarn, and embellished with intricate beadwork and feathers, reflecting their tribal affiliations and personal styles. While the Grass Dance has undergone changes over time, it remains an important cultural expression for Northern Plains tribes, serving as a means of preserving traditions, fostering community connections, and honoring ancestral heritage.



INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Begin the lesson with a brief overview of the Plains people and their connection to sweetgrass. In connection with the cultural appreciation, the teacher will share more about the work of student. The teacher is encouraged to share more history and background surrounding the shell gorget. Upon understanding the significance sweetgrass-plays in Native culture and history, students will create their own sweetgrass braid.



ACTIVITY

Gather Your Materials: Collect fresh sweetgrass stalks by pulling from the root, as we want as much of the stalk as possible. You'll need roughly 20-40 stalks to create a braid of desirable length and width.

Prepare the Stalks: Trim the ends of the sweetgrass stalks to remove any dry or damaged sections. Ensure the stalks are clean and free from debris.

Moisten the Stalks (Optional): If the sweetgrass is dry and brittle, you can moisten it slightly by briefly soaking in water until the grass has softened, 5-10 minutes. This will make it more flexible and easier to work with.

Arrange the Stalks: Align the sweetgrass stalks so their ends are even and all pointing in the same direction top to bottom.

Tie Off Base: Using either another piece of grass or the yarn/twine supplied, tie off the bottom end, closest to the base of the plant.

Begin Braiding: Hold the stalks firmly together between your knees or with the assistance of a friend, keeping tension even to create a tight, uniform braid. Separate them into three equal sections. Like braiding hair, cross the right section over the middle section, then the left section over the new middle section. As you braid, try to center your focus on your breathing, and with each crossing of a strand, speak or meditate the words: mind... body... spirit... and repeat until you've come to the end of the grass.

Secure the End: When you reach your desired length or run out of sweetgrass, secure the end of the braid by tying a knot or using a small piece of ribbon or string to hold it together.

Trim Excess: If there are any uneven ends sticking out, trim them to create a neat, finished look.

Dry the Braid: If the sweetgrass is still moist, allow the braid to air dry completely before using it for smudging.

EVALUATION

Evaluate students based on their engagement in discussions, the effort displayed in their sweetgrass braid, and their understanding and respect for Plains culture as reflected in their final piece and participation in class discussions. This lesson plan not only educates students about Plains culture and art but also encourages them to think critically about indigenous cultures and the importance of preserving such traditions.

- In what ways can learning about and respecting the cultural significance of sweetgrass promote better relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities?
- What feelings or thoughts arise when you think about or handle sweetgrass? How might the act of braiding sweetgrass serve as a meditative or reflective practice for you?
- Consider the process of braiding sweetgrass. What does this process teach about the importance of attention to detail and dedication in other areas of life?