

Activity: Creative Expression Goal: Psychological/Emotional Populations: All

TH Activity Plan – California Native Oaks: A Sense of Place

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ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will learn about California heritage, specifically native oak trees & their historical background to the state.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Explore the lore & horticultural facts associated with oak trees, specifically [Coast Live Oak](#) and [Valley Oak](#)

Physical: Strengthen hand-eye coordination & pincer grip by grinding acorns

Psychological/Emotional: Compare acorn attributes to self; increase self-awareness; consider personal sense of place, belonging & identity in California or elsewhere

Sensory: Smell, taste & view acorn and acorn products; discern sensory qualities, describing them to others

Social: Participate in discussions & hands-on activities; improve social awareness in a group setting; listen patiently & with tolerance when others speak

Materials

Oak acorns, acorn flour,
acorn products

Almond, wheat, corn flour

Hand graters, mortar & pestle

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Gather materials. Determine if any participants have allergies to acorn or acorn flour. Set up room for activities.
2. Facilitator begins session by asking who is a native Californian. Have participants share stories of how they came to live in California. Introduce topic of oaks and why this plant/tree is associated with native peoples in this region. Facilitator has researched facts to guide discussion.
3. Group breaks into smaller numbers & undertake the hands-on acorn activities: grinding seed into flour and touching/smelling/viewing ground acorn. **If tasting is part of activity, use only commercially bought acorn flour; untreated contains poisonous acids.** Compare sensory attributes of acorn flour to other flour (almond, wheat, corn).
4. Facilitator leads discussion of historical attributes of oaks & acorns encouraging participants to think about their human traits vs oak tree traits (strong, long lived, both deciduous and evergreen species, allelopathic etc.). Do native Californian oaks create a sense of place for them?

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: The heritage and connection of indigenous people of California to native oaks can begin a TH session exploring human connections to sense of place, history and plant life. These are directly related to a sense of belonging and identity. The facilitator, using intention to do so, can establish links to plants of a region, in this case, native oaks, for participants to explore their own roots, plants or other

botanical or nature elements that bond them to a place. These provide a way of interpreting the world from a personal and positive egocentric point of view.

“A sense of place comes from a feeling of connectedness, be it physical, emotional, or spiritual, to a specific geographic area (Relph 1976). Developing a sense of place through geographic experiences helps build the social and emotional foundation children need and will one day use as adults” (Brillante & Mankiw, 2015).

Epstein theorized that “developing a sense of place is linked to a sense of belonging, which contributes to children’s [and adult’s] social and emotional development” (2009). “Humanistic geographers suggest that sense of place and belonging—attachment to spaces (physical addresses or regions)—are where people *feel* at home, and this can include plants, landmarks, schools and experiences. These become part of an identity. People recall childhood trees, playing in creeks, smells of camping, and grandma’s garden” (Fleming, 2025).

Therapeutic goals that can be incorporated into the session can address health challenges across domains, or focus on wellness, for example, expanding horticultural and historical knowledge. Psychological goals can include exploring a sense of identity, and personal attributes. Applications for people with hand dysfunction can work towards improving pincer grip, hand-eye coordination or sensorimotor skills. Sensory therapeutic goals can include using senses to discern qualities of acorns and acorn flour, in comparison to other flours.

Applications for specific populations can include children, and their development of sense of place. Newcomers, refugees or immigrants and their exploration of their new communities, with the intent of creating a sense of belonging to a specific area can be supported with this TH activity. Veterans and active military, often moved from one community to another, may find connecting plants to specific geographical areas will provide understanding of their lifestyle and its constant relocation, using plants as a grounding anchor.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. Allergies, swallowing issues or contraindications with medication need to be identified prior to session. People with respiratory challenges may want to wear masks to avoid inhaling flour. Untreated acorn flour contains poisonous tannic acid; do not ingest. Food safety protocols should be implemented.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Acorn flour can be bought at specialty stores or online. Session could be expanded to include a baking option. **Only consume commercially bought acorn flour, as untreated acorn flour contains poisonous tannic acid.** Discussion on how the native Californians treated the acorn flour can add context to the session. Acorn mush was a common use of acorn flour. Native Californians still gather and prepare acorns today.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

- Calscape. (2025). [Coast Live Oak \(Quercus agrifolia\)](#). *California Native Plant Society*.
- Fleming, L. (2025). [Connecticut nutmeggers: A sense of place](#). *University of Florida Therapeutic Horticulture Activities Database*.
- Underwood, E. (2021). [Ancient oaks](#). *Flora Magazine*.
- University of California. [Oak tree species ID & ecology](#). *Oaks.cnr.berkeley.edu*.

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TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2024.