

Polypodium glycyrrhiza (licorice fern)

Meaning: *Polypodium* means “many feet” and refers to the plant’s branched rhizomes. *Glycyrrhiza* comes from the Greek *glykys* meaning sweet and *rhiza* a root.

Description: Small to medium sized, evergreen, to 70 cm long. The rhizomes are creeping, branching, sweet and licorice-flavoured. The fronds are lance-shaped and pinnatifid. The sori are round (sometimes oval when immature), yellow to brown and are usually found midway between margin and midrib.

Habitat: Dry and seasonally wet rocks, trees, and soil humus in the lowland and montane zones; Common on the calcium-rich bark of broad-leaved trees, typically on *Acer macrophyllum* (big-leaf maple).

Habit: Grows on logs, trees and rocks.

Range: In North America, licorice fern is common in coastal BC, north to southeastern Alaska and south to California; there is also a disjunct population in Idaho. *Polypodium glycyrrhiza* can also be found in Asia in Kamchatka.

Wildlife notes: Epiphytic plants such as licorice fern are important because they provide a habitat niche for many organisms. Licorice fern also provides food for herbivorous insects and mammals.

Other notes: The rhizome (underground stem) of licorice fern contains a substance called osladin, which is 3000 times sweeter than sugar.

First Nations use: The rhizomes were chewed by the Squamish, Sechelt, Comox, Nuxalk, Haida and Kwakwaka’wakw. Occasionally, the rhizomes were dried, steamed, scorched or eaten raw. The rhizomes were an important medicine for colds and sore throats. They were also mixed with bitter medicines as a sweetener.

For information about propagating *Polypodium glycyrrhiza*, go to:

www.goert.ca/propagation_guidelines/ferns_and_allies/polypodium_glycyrrhiza

References:

- Flora of North America (www.efloras.org)
- *Plants of Coastal British Columbia*, compiled and edited by Jim Pojar and Andy MacKinnon
- *Illustrated Flora of BC*, Volume 5, edited by George Douglas, et al.
- *Indicator Plants of Coastal BC* by Karel Klinka et al.
- Garry Oak Ecosystem Recovery Team (www.goert.ca)



Photo: Dawn Hanna