

## **Celebration of America's First Farmers**

*By Glenn Lamberg, American Indian Liaison*

Our original citizens of this great country have been encroached upon, removed, relocated to reservations, assimilated, put in boarding schools, and institutionally mistreated since the 1700's. All these efforts have greatly reduced the knowledge of these original peoples of their ancestor's methods of farming.

The traditional stories of the Anishinaabek communities of the Great Lakes includes information related to corn, beans, squash, sunflowers and other plants which are commonly grown today.

It is also known that these early communities also incorporated into their growing of crops the practice of rotating areas, minimizing cultivation, natural fertilizers and incorporating companion crops. These are the same practices that we presently know are best for the land. The crops that were grown at this time had been chosen and cultivated for the quality of the food product, not the shelf life or the ability to be transported. The early grown foods are now being shown to be healthier for these original people.

The transformation of the American Indian from a producer and harvester of their own foods was greatly influenced by the European influences of the 1800's. The relocation of the original people from their traditional established fertile fields to remote reservations had a great influence on the loss of growing crops. During and just before the Assimilation Period (1887-1934) the U.S. Government and religious groups pushed homesteading with male controlled, plow agriculture. Male

American Indians were introduced to the European concepts of growing crops which the Europeans thought would make the Indian independent, and more accepted into the non-native communities. The efforts were incomprehensible to the American Indian.



The American Indian culture was a nomadic, matriarchal system of farming. The women were the caregivers to this process of growing and nurturing plants. This system had been in place in Michigan for up to 800 years prior to the arrival of the European.

The women traditionally developed the tools, cared for the seeds, planted the crops and insured harvest and storage of the crops was cared for physically and spiritually. The men helped with clearing the land, preparing the sites for planting and often left their family units to gather/hunt and scout and prepare for future areas of planting crops.

The efforts of America's homesteading society to assimilate Native Americans to their methods of farming were encouraged. The new way clearly was not the best for the American Indian and Mother Earth! The relocation of the American Indian resulted in non traditional foods being introduced into their diets by the US Government.

Wheat flour, a European crop, was provided on reservations as a staple. This flour along with sugar and bacon/lard were adapted to by the relocated tribal member as survival foods. These changes along with the replacement of a nomadic life style to a sedentary

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### New Online Resource Provides Plant Information

Information on plant species from anywhere in the United States and its territories is now as close as your computer.



The Plants Database is an online resource made available by the NRCS National Plant Data Center in Baton Rouge, La. The Plants Database lets you search for a specific plant species using either its scientific, common

name or symbol.

Some of the information provided by the Plants Database includes photos of the

plant species, taxonomical information, where it grows in the U.S. and whether it is native or introduced.

You can find the Plants Database on the Internet at <http://plants.usda.gov>.

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### USDA Assisting Effort to Revive American Indian Agriculture

life were extraordinarily detrimental to the health of these original people. Diabetes, heart problems, obesity and mental health are all issues of this changed lifestyle.

The early knowledge of growing crops and the traditional seed availability is being rapidly lost. The influence of the European settlements definitely had more impact on the original people in our eastern states than those further west. With this in mind Michigan Anishinaabek communities are finding that their relatives in Wisconsin and Minnesota have been able to save and use the traditional knowledge of their ancestors in caring and growing traditional food and medicinal crops.

The healthiness of the people and Mother Earth lies in the growing and consumption of traditional foods, including vegetables and fruits in their most basic state. Whole grains, unprocessed fruits and vegetables, plants grown regionally with reduced inputs, are most healthy for people and Mother Earth.

Today's society has the responsibility to work with the descendents of America's First Farmers and assist them in their efforts to reestablish the knowledge and abilities to farm the land they own for the health of

themselves and their families. The growing level of health issues related to fast food-processed food-prepared food is having very negative impacts on our communities of American Indians. The removal of the traditional foods of the American Indian people from the landscape of America could be the result of this trend.

The United States Department of Agriculture with the knowledge, skills and abilities of the persons within the agencies and the USDA Land Grant institutions is available to develop capacity of the American Indian Communities to change this downward cycle of poor food systems of our original people!

In 2005, USDA and NRCS is assisting 6 tribal communities in gardening efforts. NRCS will continue to celebrate America's First Farmers by assisting them to establish and utilize the foods best suited for their physical and traditional needs.

NRCS has produced 5 worksheets with Wisconsin tribes on how to extend growing seasons for gardening. Visit our website at:

<http://plant-materials.nrcs.usda.gov/mipmc/communitygardens.html>