

Native Americans rediscover ancestral foods

By Minneapolis Star Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff

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MINNEAPOLIS — Bit by bit, the farm at Little Earth is growing.

So, too, is a new movement that is spreading among Native Americans across the nation. The idea is to improve the health of Indians through rediscovering the foods of their ancestors and connections to lands once lost.

Little Earth of United Tribes is a low-income housing complex in south Minneapolis. Its residents are far from access to natural maple syrup, wild rice and game meat— yet they are finding new old ways to grow crops that existed long before European settlers arrived.

Some even have a name for the idea — the decolonized diet.

“It’s growing in the last 10 years within the native communities in the United States,” said Susen Fagrelius, coordinator of Little Earth’s community health projects. As more people realize they can grow a significant amount of vegetables on a small parcel of land, they discover that “they have the ability to take back their food system.”

Old Crops Make A Return

Lakota sage appears where once ordinary grass grew. Rows of Oneida cornstalks tower 6 feet in the air. Raspberries — the kind that once blanketed North American forests — cover a small patch of the farm.

Across the country, projects like the Little Earth Urban Farm are taking aim at the health problems that plague American Indian communities. Indian adults are twice as likely to be diagnosed with diabetes as the general population, and many are seriously overweight.

“The health problems among native people have just become so profound you have no place to go but up. It has to be addressed,” said Devon Abbott Mihesuah, who runs the American Indian Health and Diet Project at the University of Kansas.

When Indians were forced onto reservations, government-supplied goods replaced the unprocessed, nutrient-rich foods they were used to eating, said Mihesuah.

“Type 2 diabetes didn’t start showing up until after the Civil War,” she said. “Up until that time there weren’t any pictures of (Indian) people being fat.”

Spreading Seeds Nationwide

Fry bread is served at many Indian gatherings, but the flavorful, deep-fried dough is not a native food, Mihesuah argues. She has a bumper sticker on her car with a red line crossing out the words "fry bread." She's taken some heat for that statement from other Indians who have called her "anti-Indian," she said.

Despite some resistance, the decolonized diet movement is spreading seeds nationwide.

In New Mexico, food programs are working to preserve seeds from hundreds of years ago — so-called heritage seeds, many for plants that have almost died out. Tribes in North Carolina are restoring native fruit and vegetable plants in newly established gardens. In western Minnesota, the White Earth Land Recovery Project aims to preserve original land practices.

The Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community is at the forefront of these efforts. Lori Watso, a nurse and Shakopee tribe member, was the inspiration for the expansive garden established on tribal land in Prior Lake, Minnesota.

Through food, she wanted to "help our community and other native communities" deal with a severe health crisis, she said. The diabetes rate among Indians in Minnesota is a whopping 40 percent.

Reversing that trend remains a daunting challenge.

"It's very difficult to change people's minds about something so personal as (the food) they're going to put into their bodies," Watso said.

"A Place Where Things Grow"

A number of plants in the garden come from heritage seeds. Once harvested, the fruits and vegetables are dispersed among Shakopee tribe members as well as other Indian communities.

Watso thinks there's something revealing about rekindling this connection to the land.

“I believe in our bodies, our DNA or whatever, (we have) the ability to recognize those foods,” she said. “It’s in our genetic makeup — those things sustained us and I believe our bodies recognize those things.”

The Shakopee Mdewakanton garden is called “Wozupi,” a Dakota word meaning “a place where things grow.”

Since starting in 2010, the garden has more than doubled in size.

Now in its fifth growing season, the 12-acre Wozupi has an orchard with trees bearing fruits local to the region — June berries, elderberries and wild plums. Goats and chickens roam the newly added Children’s Garden. There’s also a Heritage Garden, where ancient seeds given to them from other tribes grow. Chokecherries, prairie onions, Cherokee tomatoes and Lower Sioux corn are among the native plants recently brought back to life.

“When you pull the seeds out, people just light up,” said Rebecca Yoshino, the director of the Wozupi.

More Fruits And Vegetables To Come

Far from the wide open spaces and roaming goats in Shakopee, city farmers at Little Earth in Minneapolis work a tiny strip of once-vacant land. The sound of cars buzzing by does not distract them from tending to budding crops. The ground is contaminated, they say, so the Little Earth farmers use wood chips mixed in compost to create the raised beds. They add fertile soil donated by the Shakopee tribe, which also shares seeds with this small community.

“They’ve been really generous,” Fagrelius said. “There’s been a process of awakening going on at Little Earth.”

She hopes one day the city farm will become fully sustainable. Plans are underway to add a greenhouse that would allow them to grow more of the fruits and vegetables traditionally native to the area.

If these goals are going to be achieved, Little Earth will need the help of people like George Lussier. The 68-year-old has embraced the decolonized diet and tends the farm's corn.

A member of the Red Lake nation, he grew up watching his grandmother and mother tend gardens full of vegetables.

He said he now tries to live by the words his grandmother, who lived into her 80s, would often say: "Remember the things that you were taught when you were young."