

Tribal Gardens

Fort Berthold Community College, New Town, ND

Case study by

Corrin Jones and Leah Jacobson, North Dakota State University, January 2001

Introduction

The community gardens established on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation have allowed the tribal members to promote native gardening practices of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara and assist families to gain fresh produce for healthy diets. Ronald Reum and Ron Cline, two Fort Berthold Community College faculty members, were interviewed in January 2001, regarding the project.

Plans for the tribal gardens project began in 1994, when the Fort Berthold Community College achieved land-grant institution status. To fulfill the requirements of a land-grant institution, the college needed to conduct research. The present project began with the purpose of establishing a land laboratory for the college in which to grow produce for the residents of the community. The project had the potential of both teaching the cultural significance of gardening and improving the diets of the people. Of particular concern was the role of diet on diabetes. The reservation has experienced a high and continually growing rate of diabetes.

The land for the gardens was acquired through a lease with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in which no money is actually exchanged, but the Corps inspects the gardens annually to determine that they are well maintained and to approve the growing practices being used. Groundwork began on the site of an abandoned farmstead in 1997. The first growing season was the summer of 1998.

The gardens were started with a traditional garden as part of the land laboratory, but has grown into several individual plots maintained by employees of the college, youth of the community, and others who wished to participate. Crops grown in the garden included alfalfa, sweet clover, oats, peas, turnicalia, potatoes, and sweet corn.

Organizational Relationships

Because the gardens are maintained by a community college, the elders of the three tribes of the community – the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara – are involved in the decisions regarding the gardens. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers must also approve decisions. Polly Cummings Chase, an NDSU Extension Service agent on the reservation, is involved in writing grants and works with youth in the gardens through the 4-H program.

The Fort Berthold Community College has individuals on staff who oversee the gardens. Ronald Reum, the agricultural director for the college, has been with the project since the beginning, and Ron Cline, the soil and plant science specialist for the college's agricultural department, has worked with the project for one season. One full-time worker and some seasonal part-time employees are caretakers of the gardens.

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Traditional Garden – Land Lab

The traditional garden is separated into seven plots approximately 180 feet by 200 feet. Eight-foot barriers between the plots allow equipment to move about the site. Three plots are split into 22 private gardens about 20 feet by 40 feet in size. The garden includes a drying station, which was erected in Fall 2000.

The traditional gardens are in close proximity to Lake Sakakawea. When the Lake is at a high level, the land nearby floods up to the boundary of the gardens. Thus the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has mandated that the land laboratory gardens must be organic, with no use of chemicals. Weeds must then be carefully monitored and removed before they go to seed.

Individual Gardens

Individual gardens are granted to community members on a first-come-first-serve basis. The only requirement is that the plots must be well maintained. Those who maintained their gardens well last year will receive first choice of plots this year. About 30 youth are involved in a youth garden under the direction of Polly Cummings Chase and Jay Fisher. Individuals who maintain plots may grow whatever they wish, and either keep the produce for themselves or give it to the elders of the community.

Not all of the individual gardens are at the land laboratory site. Other community gardens are located throughout the reservation, such as the community gardens in Mandaree and White Shield. These gardens do not have to be organic. White Shield, a nearby community, has had three years of success with their community gardens, in large part to a core group of 40 or 50 people that keep the project going. Of the plots in White Shield, 94 percent were used last year.

Distribution

Distribution of the produce is done both privately and in community buildings. Produce is commonly given to elders of the community. It is also used by students of the Community College, who hold potluck dinners using food from the gardens.

Blending of Traditional and Modern Growing Practices

Although the gardening involves some traditional practices, some modern practices also are used. The program's directors have used the book, *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden*, by Gilbert L. Wilson as a reference for traditional gardening. Native seed is used where possible, and the directors are attempting to establish a seed bank, which would allow native seed to be passed on. One individual donated corn seed that has been in his family for generations, but they are having trouble acquiring more seed.

Modern equipment, such as an electric fence to keep animals out, tillers, and chemicals in the individual gardens, are used in cooperation with traditional methods. The program's directors hope to incorporate more native practices, particularly by adding a praying/singing station, which acts to promote activity that keeps birds and other animal pests away. They intend to add a log cabin in which to store gardening tools and bison, elk, and deer horns.

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Challenges and Opportunities

One challenge to incorporating traditional practices into the gardening has been that the elders of the three affiliated tribes – Arikara, Hidatsa, and Mandan – sometimes disagree over which methods should be used, since each culture's methods differ somewhat. The directors would like to see a core group of elders who can be flexible take on consultation for the project.

The project has allowed the production of a native grass plot, in which 12 different species of native grass are grown and labeled. Elementary and high schools use the plot as an educational tool. The directors hope to expand this by creating an arboretum using trees already located on the site and by adding new ones. The directors would also like to build portable storage sheds at the different garden locations where staff could supply tilling equipment and hand tools on a weekly rotation.

The program has encouraged residents to create their own gardens. One lady asked that they plow up a section of her lawn so she could start gardening there.

The directors wrote a grant which is currently pending for a voucher program for the production and distribution of produce from the gardens. Under this program, vouchers would be given to the elders of the community for a set amount of produce each month. The elders would purchase produce with the vouchers and growers would turn the vouchers in to the tribe for money.

Summary

Because of cooperation between a number of individuals, agencies, and tribes, the tribal gardening project at Fort Berthold Community College has seen much growth and success in the last couple years. This success has promoted cooperative organization, healthy eating, organic gardening, and native gardening practices. The program has enabled a generation of tribal members to regain gardening traditions and native customs that can be pass on.

The program will likely continue to grow, especially if efforts such as the voucher program are approved and used. The produce may eventually be marketed to a larger audience, as demand increases for organic foods. Continued support by the members involved will be crucial to the ongoing success of the program. Health impacts, such as reduced diabetes, remains a topic of research.

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Photograph 1. Corn in Traditional Garden.

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Photograph 2. Individual Garden.

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Photograph 3. Youth Garden.

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For Further Reading

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