

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
Office of the Vice President for Research

RESEARCH DAYS



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THREE SISTERS REUNITED: GARDENING AS INDIGENOUS RESURGENCE

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**Growing Together With the Three Sisters: Indigenous Gardening
for Cultural Resurgence**

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Edward Goodbird's son spreading-corn to dry



Wolf Chief family stringing squash



Hoeing with bone hoe



INDIGENOUS AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES
Images courtesy of North Dakota Historical Society

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For centuries many Native Americans grew corn, beans, and squash together in one plot, along with the less familiar sunflower. They called the plants sisters to reflect how they thrived when they were cultivated together. As a [scholar of Indigenous studies](#) focusing on the mechanisms Native people use to assert sovereign relationships with the land, and as a resident of a corn covered state, I came to realize the importance of Indigenous food sovereignty.

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ASSIMILATING TO EURO-AMERICAN AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES

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I began my research by exploring how Native American agriculturalists around the Great Lakes and along the Missouri River fed fur traders with their diverse vegetable products. Historically, Native growers were careful breeders who selected for traits that thrived in the growing conditions of their homelands. They produced bountiful harvests that sustained large communities and fruitful trade. As Euro-Americans settled permanently on the most fertile North American lands and acquired seeds that Native growers had carefully bred, they imposed policies that made Native farming practices impossible. They forced Native peoples from their home territories, pushing them onto subpar reservation lands.

Native men were pressured to practice Euro-American style monoculture and Native women were relegated to growing small garden plots. Allotment policies assigned acreage to nuclear families, further limiting access to land and preventing communal farming practices. Native children were forced to attend boarding schools, where they had no opportunity to learn Native agriculture techniques or preparation of Indigenous foods. Taken together, these policies almost entirely eradicated three sisters agriculture from Native communities by the 1930s.

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Three Sisters Intercropping

- Corn, beans, and squash grown together.

INDIGENOUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

A collaborator garden in MN



My first corn braid

- the ability to determine culturally appropriate foodways.

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Researching this history, I came to learn that Native people all over the U.S. are working diligently to reclaim Indigenous varieties of corn, beans, squash, sunflowers and other crops. I began to wonder what benefits have emerged from this resurgence. To answer this questions, I am working with agronomist Marshall McDaniel, horticulturalist Ajay Nair, nutritionist Donna Winham and Native growers throughout the Midwest. Our research project, “Reuniting the Three Sisters,” explores what it means to be a responsible caretaker of the land from the perspective of peoples who have been balancing agricultural production with sustainability for hundreds of years.

SLIDE

COLLABORATING NATIVE GROWERS



NEBRASKA INDIAN
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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We work collaboratively with Tsyunhehkw Farm and the Ohelaku Corn Growers Co-Op on the Oneida reservation in Wisconsin; the Nebraska Indian College, which serves the Omaha and Santee nations; and Dream of Wild Health, a nonprofit organization that works to reconnect the Native community in Minneapolis-St. Paul with traditional Native plants. Our project runs workshops on topics of interests to Native gardeners, encourages participatory research on soil health, and grows rare seeds in ISU plots to rematriate them, or return them to their home communities.

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INDIGENOUS AGRICULTURE AS A HEALING PRACTICE



My son and I
learning to husk
and building
relationships



Sharing with
non-human
relatives



To learn more
about our



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Through interviews with Native growers and elders knowledgeable about foodways, I have learned that the process of Indigenous agriculture reveals the kinship of all living things, and therefore requires us to reconsider the relationships humans have to our non-human relatives. It repairs the ecosystem in powerful ways. I have seen how healing Indigenous gardening practices can be for the environment, Native communities, and people – body, mind, and spirit.

As researchers, we are learning to respect protocols our Native collaborators value, such as treating seeds, plants and soil in a culturally appropriate manner, considering them as relatives. By listening with humility, we are working to build a network where we can all learn from one another.

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Thank you!