Growing Our Traditional Foods

What is the value of corn, beans, and squash to Haudenosaunee people today?

We are tempted to think we can get whatever we want now. We think we can just go online and order anything from the internet. But the one thing that the internet can’t deliver is meaning. It can’t give you a feeling of connection. It can’t give you a feeling of place.

The value of corn, beans, and squash is that it connects you directly to your ancestors. It connects you directly to the reason why this world was made. We are part of an ongoing process that started a long time ago. Every time you put a seed in the ground, you keep that process alive. Every time you eat that food, you complete that process and benefit from it. So, it’s really about finding your place with the larger system.

We need a new plan for finding our place. We can base a new plan upon the old patterns of our culture. Our place is in the garden and in the fields. It is in the council house and in the ceremonial longhouse. For us, corn, beans, and squash are the original food. We have a connection to them. That is very important to our identity.

Rick Hill (Tuscarora)
Scholar of Haudenosaunee culture and history, former special assistant to the director of the National Museum of the American Indian

This reading was adapted by AMNH from Rick Hill’s original writing, with his approval, for younger audiences. The original piece of writing can be found at amnh.org/ewi-educators

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What is the value of corn, beans, and squash to Haudenosaunee people today?

When I think about corn, beans, and squash, I think about heirloom foods. Heirloom means it’s been handed down to us. These traditional foods carry information from generation to generation.

Heirloom foods are unique. They look different and they have different nutritional properties. Not all corn, beans, and squash are the same. You have yellow squash. You have zucchini. There’s so many different kinds of corn. It is the same with the beans. There’s just this precious diversity in our traditional food.

I can go online and order nearly anything I want now. I can get an avocado from South America shipped to my door with just the click of a button! So why are we bothering to grow our traditional foods now? Because it’s important. It’s part of our identity. It’s part of who we are. It carries that connection to our ancestors. It is a gift. Our bodies remember and connect with our Onkwehonwe (Indigenous) foods. That’s so important, physically and spiritually. When we grow food, we’re connected to the land.

That’s the important difference between our traditional foods and the foods from the rest of the world. When we order that avocado, who handles that? Where did it come from? Who produced it? Is there a connection there? Even though the avocado was grown many miles away, it still has value. We can still appreciate its nutrition. But our traditional foods are different. Our corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers connect us directly through our land. They connect us to our ancestors, and our ancestral and body memory. And I just think that’s so important.

We need to keep these traditional foods alive. We need to keep the seeds alive. If we were to stop growing them, then they don’t get to live. They don’t get to continue for generations beyond us. That is our responsibility we carry when we accept these seeds. Also, it’s food sovereignty. It is a key to keeping our own health, sustenance, and economy. Not just food sovereignty, but sovereignty itself.
What is the value of corn, beans, and squash to Haudenosaunee people today?

The value that corn has brought to our people has been too big to measure. Without it, I don't think our people would be here. It provides most of the nutrients we need. Even if you're not a good hunter or a good fisherman, the corn, beans, and squash can sustain us. In our longhouse, you'll find corn in almost every ceremony. And without those ceremonies, I don't know if there would be people still planting our traditional corn today. This corn has sustained us for centuries.

What if people weren't growing corn? Or what if we didn't have our ceremonies that need corn? I think that those two things keep corn in our community. Otherwise, I would almost say our communities would be dependent upon commodities, like wheat from Europe and rice from Asia.

I saw in the 1960’s and 1970’s the Federal food commodities coming into our communities. You’d see the shortening or lard, and people would be using that and white flour and water or milk to make a bread called fry bread. John Mohawk, a scholar from our community, said “he thinks that fry bread killed more Native people than the wars that we fought. He’s probably right as a lot of heart disease and other nutritional issues affected our people. That was not evident when we lived in a good way with our traditional foods.

That’s why we try to have more fish, moose meat, and deer meat. We try to eat the stuff that we can get directly from Mother Earth. The animals and plants are still following the Creator’s original instructions. The animals and plants may even follow those instructions better than us! We need to live in the most natural way we can by eating the most natural foods. So yes, corn, beans, and squash have been very significant. We give special thanks in our ceremonies for the traditional foods we refer to as jo-hey-goh (our sustainers). These foods continue to be a very important part within.
Indigenous life in the Americas.