Growing Our Traditional Foods

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

You know, we’re tempted to think now that we can get whatever we want. And now you're just going to go online and order from the internet. But the one thing that the internet can't deliver to you is a meaning, a feeling of connection, and a feeling of place. You can buy books about it, buy films about it, but the internet can't actually provide that.

So, I think that the value of corn, beans, and squash is that it connects you directly to not only your ancestors, but the reason why this world was made. And that to me, that's kind of interesting where you begin to realize we're part of an ongoing process that started a long time ago. Every time you put a seed in the ground, you perpetuate that process. Every time you eat that food that's there, it helps to generate the beneficiary of that process. So, it's really about finding your place.

A whole new strategy for finding our place would actually be based upon the old patterns of culture. Our place is in the garden, as well as in the fields, and in the council house, and in the ceremonial longhouse. But that elemental connection to corn, beans, and squash as the original food, I think, is very important to our identity.
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So when I think about corn, beans, and squash, I think about heirloom foods. And what does heirloom mean exactly? It’s been handed down to us. They carry information from generation to generation.

They are very unique and they have their own presentations as we grow them. They look different ways. They have different nutritional properties. Not all corn, beans, and squash are the same. Not all squash is the same. We have other varieties. You have yellow squash, zucchini. Thinking of all the different kinds of corn, there’s so many different qualities. And it’s the same with the beans. There’s just this precious diversity in our traditional food.

So in a time when I can go online and add to my shopping cart nearly anything I want from Whole Foods—I can get an avocado from South America shipped to my door with just the click of a button. Or I can get mango and some pineapple on demand, or food from the other side of the world, coconuts, all of that just click and it’s shipped. That is certainly valuable.

So then, why are we bothering to grow our traditional foods now? It’s important. It’s part of our identity. It’s part of who we are, and it carries that connection to our ancestors. And it carries the genetic code, like an heirloom. It is a gift. I think also, when you look at the science behind it, our bodies remember this information, our Onkwehonwe (Indigenous) foods. Our bodies connect with the cells of these foods. And I think that’s so important, physically and spiritually. When we grow food, we’re connected to the land.

I think that’s why we have to differentiate the importance of our traditional foods. Because when we compare it to all the foods we get 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? That’s not to say it doesn’t have value. We can certainly appreciate nutrition. But at the same time, our traditional foods—corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers—connect us directly through our land, and our ancestors, and our ancestral and body memory. And I just think that’s so important.

And also, we need to keep them alive. We need to keep the seeds alive and keep our foods alive, because if we were to stop growing them, then they don’t get to live and they don’t get to continue for generations beyond us. And that’s our responsibility we carry when we accept these seeds. And also, it’s food sovereignty. And it’s a key to keeping our own health, sustenance, and economy. Not just food sovereignty, but sovereignty itself.
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The value that corn has brought to our people has been immeasurable because without it, I don’t think our people would be here. It provides most of the essential amino acids making up a complete protein. That said, if you’re not a good hunter or a good fisherman, the corn, beans, and squash can sustain us. And, so that’s kind of the enduring and sustaining value. An important piece there is in our longhouse, when you take a look at a lot of our ceremonies, you’ll find corn in probably almost every ceremony. And without those ceremonies, I don’t know if there would be people still planting our traditional corn that has sustained us for centuries.

I often thought about if people aren’t growing the corn, or if we didn’t have our ceremonies and the need of the corn, I think that those two kind of work hand-in-hand to keep corn in our community. Otherwise, I would almost say our communities would be dependent upon commodities. It’s hard to say that, but you see the wheat that has come in from Europe, and the rice from Asia would be more prominent in our diets. And I saw the Federal commodities coming into our communities in the ’60s and ’70s, you’d see white flour come in and you’d see rice come in and that was the genesis of fry bread. You’d see the shortening or lard, people would be using that and white flour and water or milk to make fry bread. John Mohawk, who is from our community and was a remarkable scholar said that he thinks that fry bread killed more Native people than the wars that Indigenous People fought. And just think about that... he's probably right. A lot of heart and other nutritional issues impacted our people, which was not evident when we lived in a good way with our traditional foods.

So, personally try to look, to go back in that direction with our traditional foods. That’s why we try to have more fish, moose meat, deer meat, a lot of stuff that we can get directly from Mother Earth. We often think, the animals and plants still following the Creator’s original instructions. They, the animals and plants, may even follow those instructions probably better than us. So 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 thanks for it. It’s in our Creation story, so it goes way back and it’s been a very important element within Indigenous life in the Americas.