

Federally-Recognized Tribes Extension Program
2008 HIGHLIGHTS

FRTEP UNIT: Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians
Cherokee, North Carolina

PROGRAM AREA Native Plants, Traditional Foods, Natural Resources

PROGRAM TITLE: Backyard Ramp Patch Project

ISSUE(S) ADDRESSED: Ramps are a native wild onion that grows in the Appalachian mountains and a favorite wild food gathered in the early spring by Cherokee People. The young shoots, packed with vitamins and antioxidants, are mixed with eggs, fried potatoes or sautéed and eaten as a spring tonic. “Goin’ to the ramp patch” is an annual Cherokee tradition shared from one generation to the next. Ramps are strong tasting and traditionally gathered in small “messes”. About 2 hand fulls is enough for



several meals. The Cherokee have a particular method of cutting the ramp bulb and leaving the roots and basal plate in the ground to regrow. Unfortunately, the local term is called “diggin’ ramps” and the traditional, sustainable harvesting method has been misunderstood by non-Cherokee gathers.

Martha Stewart and New York City restaurants have discovered this woodland delicacy and now over-harvesting by outside gathers has caused the Cherokee to loose access to traditional gathering patches. Both over harvesting – which has wiped out entire patches - and a ban on ramp gathering from the National Park Service has severely impacted traditional ramp gathering.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION:

The Backyard Ramp Patch Project was created as a way to increase the accessibility of this traditional food for Cherokee People. Wild-cultivated ramp bulbs are purchased from a reputable commercial grower and given to Cherokee families for replanting close to their homes. Planting and sustainable harvesting information is provided along with the bulbs.

PROGRAM IMPACTS:

This demonstration project has resulted in the replanting of 24,000 ramp bulbs over the past 5 years. This project is very popular and



volunteers gladly join in the packaging of the bulk ramp bulbs. This home demonstration project has resulted in 480 new ramp patches. Over 35 volunteers have helped package and distribute ramp bulbs.

Program participants report that the bulbs transplant very successfully. Based on interviews a year after planting, most estimate that all of their bulbs survived.

Chief Michell Hicks is so impressed with the successful results of this demonstration that he has directed the tribal forestry program to “revegetate the tribal reserve with ramps”. Forestry is currently investigating the supply of commercially grown ramps in order to carry out this directive.

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Cherokee Native Plant Study Group volunteers package ramp bulbs to give to Cherokee families for planting at home in Cherokee, North Carolina.

