

Federally-Recognized Tribes Extension Program
2008 HIGHLIGHTS

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

PROGRAM AREA Agriculture, Horticulture, Nutrition, Culture & Heritage

PROGRAM TITLE: The Center for Cherokee Plants

ISSUE(S) ADDRESSED: The Cherokee are the original farmers & gardeners of the southern Appalachian mountains in the United States. The homeland of the Cherokee supports the highest agrobiodiversity (plants & animals associated with farming) in North American - including northern Mexico and Canada. Since ancient times Cherokee families have developed vegetable varieties suited to the mountain environment. Archeological evidence reveals that corn and beans have been grown in Western North Carolina for more than 650 years. However, recently, Cherokee traditional crops & farming knowledge are in danger of being lost as fewer and fewer people engage in agriculture. Modern lifestyle, typically, work, school, and sports leaves little time for traditional farming or gardening. In 2007, “saving and promoting traditional Cherokee agricultural crops & artists’ resources” ranked highest in a community needs assessment survey in which the Cherokee public identified 20 issues in need of attention.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION:

The Center for Cherokee Plants was founded by Cherokee gardener, Kevin Welch of the Big Cove Community, to save old-time family lines of Cherokee seeds. The Center is part of a renaissance reconnecting Cherokee People with their traditional heritage and values. A partnership between Cherokee Reservation Cooperative Extension and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, the Center encompasses a seed bank / seed-share program and a nursery which is currently being developed. The nursery is growing Cherokee artists’ resource plants, native plants for wildlife and erosion control and will serve as a plant rescue temporary holding site. Educational programs have included gardening with heirloom vegetables, seed saving, Cherokee heirloom seeds and tours of the developing nursery.

In addition to saving and sharing plant materials, the Center also is active saving and sharing the traditional knowledge that goes along with the plants. Oral histories, a “Memory Bank”, compliments the seed bank. Seeds and memories are being collected and shared with other Cherokee growers to keep the crops and the knowledge alive.

In 2009 programming is aimed at getting the next generation of Cherokee youths involved with gardening. Throughout the summer, Cherokee youths will tend small gardens of their own and provide community service by working with Cherokee elders in their gardens.

PROGRAM IMPACTS:

Activities at the Center have involved 23 volunteers and 38 seed and plant donations. Through Cooperative Extension, the Center has acquired four small grants that have helped with feasibility, research, construction and initial operation.

The Center has brought attention to the value of Cherokee crops and the traditional knowledge that goes along with planting, harvesting, storing and eating these flavorful, healthful foods. Requests for traditional seeds far exceed the current supply. Through our seed share program, the Center is making these varieties available to Cherokee growers.

The increased availability of heritage crop seed has sparked renewed energy for gardening, food preservation and eating healthy traditional foods among Cherokee families.

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These tribal farm buildings are being recycled into the Center for Cherokee Plants nursery and seed bank facility of the Eastern Band of Cherokee in Western North Carolina.



Traditional Cherokee beans are as tasty as they are beautiful! The Center is saving traditional crops.