

Native American gardens

The Four Sisters of Dakota

“We cared for our corn in those days as we would care for a child; for we Indian people loved our gardens just as a mother loves her children...”

Maxi'diwiac (1839–1932)

It's hard to imagine living off the land. There would be no grocery stores, no restaurants—not even a microwave oven!

But the native tribes of North Dakota lived off the land and reaped its goodness for centuries.

The Hidatsa tribe grew four principal crops in their gardens: sunflower, maize, beans, and squash. These four “sister” crops sustained each other while growing in the garden and provided for a healthy diet.

The most famous gardener in the history of North Dakota may be Maxi'diwiac (better known as Buffalo Bird Woman), a common Hidatsa woman with an uncommon skill of sharing stories. In her chronicle, “Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden,” she shared the garden-

ing practices of her family. It's a captivating glimpse into North Dakota agriculture practiced for centuries—before Columbus and other explorers brought their technologies to our land.

The entire gardening year is described, from sowing the first sunflower seeds in spring to harvesting the squash and storing them over winter.

Growing a garden 100 years ago required hard work and a personal relationship with nature. The family's health—and sometimes survival—depended on a good crop.

Technologies were simple. The fields were tilled with hoes made of buffalo shoulder bones. The families protected their crops from birds by constructing scarecrows made of sticks and old buffalo robes. Village girls would be on guard to chase other pests—deer and mischievous boys—out of the fields.

There is a lot of gardening sense in this book. For example, weeds were not allowed to go to seed. The women hoed early in the season when corn was only three inches tall. They called the corn at this stage “young-bird's-feather-tail-corn,” because the plants then had blunt ends, like the tail feathers of a young bird.

Crops were arranged in the garden to maximize yields. Hills of corn were planted at least four feet apart in all directions. If planted closer, the plants would “smell each other” and bear small ears. Rows of bean hills were planted within the corn to enrich the soil. The prickly vines of squash were often planted along the edge to mark boundaries and deter wildlife.

The vital role of the mother in the family was evident in North Dakota's native people:



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“Did young men work in the fields? (laughing heartily.) Certainly not! The young men should be off hunting, or on a war party; and youths not yet young men should be out guarding the horses. Their duties were elsewhere, also they spent a great deal of time dressing up to be seen of the village maidens; they should not be working in the fields!”

The charm of Maxi'diwiac and her joy of gardening fill the pages of this book. The Hidatsa truly had a special relationship with the crops in their gardens. They would actually sing to their crops.

“We thought that our growing corn liked to hear us sing, just as children like to hear their mother sing to them.”

And the earth responded to the songs with its goodness. When the first corn was picked, the Hidatsa women would break off a piece of the stalk and suck its juice “for a little taste of sweets in the field”. Try it yourself. The



Maxi'diwiac (1910)

sweetness of earth is a simple joy we can all share with our Dakota ancestors.

The details of gardening practices in this book are so vivid that anyone can use these chronicles to grow an historic Hidatsa garden today. Varieties of the four “sisters” including ‘Mandan Red’ maize, ‘Arikara’ sunflower, and

‘Hidatsa Shield’ bean are available from seed companies such as Seed Savers Exchange and Seeds of Change. The book itself is available from bookstores or can be down-loaded online.

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Photos courtesy of University of Pennsylvania.



Left: A deer horn was attached to a cottonwood stick for use as a rake. Right: Squash was sliced and slit through sticks for drying in the sun.