

GROWING GARDENS

Each month this year we're looking at a different case of how Indigenous knowledge that was developed and shared over generations led to the many successes of the Seminole and their ancestors. This month we focus on gardening and agriculture. Modern Seminole families still enjoy lots of traditional foods, like sofkee and pumpkin fry bread. Both of those Seminole comfort foods use key ingredients that have been enjoyed since ancestral times.

Corn, or maize, often a main ingredient in sofkee, was first domesticated by Indigenous people in central Mexico almost 10,000 years ago! It quickly spread across the Americas and became an important crop for Seminole ancestors. In fact, 1000 years ago, corn was the staple of many Indigenous groups in what became the southeastern United States. As you might imagine, today's corn, which is mostly modified for mass production, has lost many of the qualities that the ancestors worked to produce in it. Unlike modern corn, ancestral corn came in many varieties because it was bred to grow in many different places. This made it more adaptable and resilient, which are great qualities for agriculture, and made it less harmful to the environment – modern corn requires adaptations to the environment to fit the needs of the grower, while ancestral corn was modified to fit local environments. One variety of ancestral corn, Sierra Mixe, bred by Indigenous farmers in Oaxaca, Mexico, even produces its own nutrients (nitrogen)!

Pumpkin, another favorite domesticated plant among Seminole families past and present, has been around almost as long as corn (maybe even a bit longer). Seminole ancestors produced the variety of pumpkin that bears the Seminole name (Seminole pumpkin) by breeding in qualities that allowed it to grow in warm places like Florida. The thick skin makes it more resilient to the hot, humid climate, allowing it to stay fresh in storage for months. It's also tastier and less fibrous than traditional pumpkin, making it more edible and enjoyable.



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Photo: A Seminole man taking stock of his cornfield. (ca 1950)
Courtesy Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum (ref number 2007.46.28)

