

## SUSTAINABILITY



Choctaw sweet potato squash

MAKYNA SHARP

# Back to the Future

Choctaw Nation's Growing Hope heritage seed program cultivates cultural legacy

By Kit Bernardi

**J**ACQUELINE PUTMAN MAKES HER early morning rounds of the Growing Hope program's sunny greenhouse and thriving gardens on the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Capitol's grounds in Tuskahoma, Okla.

Inspecting slender, curvy bottle gourds, she gently fingers the rare, endangered

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MAKYNNA SHARP

plant's delicate white blossoms. She carries the perfectly round, unblemished, 15-pound Choctaw sweet potato squash in her arms like a proud mother cradling a healthy, robust baby.

Putman manages Growing Hope, which tracks down rare seeds, propagates them and distributes seeds to tribal members nationwide. Some Growing Hope plant varieties range in age from 300 to 2,500 years old.

These rare plant varieties receive Putman's nurturing tender touch because, to her, they are like family. Flour corn, squash, beans, peas and premium Perique tobacco springing from endangered seeds are descendants of plants Choctaw ancestors cultivated in community fields in parts of what are now Mississippi and Alabama.

"This program is how I love my people," Putman says. "I want them to have the

**"The Growing Hope program works to revitalize Choctaw Nation's agricultural heritage and brings back sustainable health to our families. The traditional Choctaw diet based on plant-based foods is a world-class cuisine just as deep and vibrant as any other ethnic food worldwide."**

**— IAN THOMPSON,  
tribal historic preservation officer and  
archeologist, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma**

best of our culture and be nutritionally independent by producing sustainable foods for themselves just as our ancestors did. Growing Hope receives heritage seeds through community partnerships. Brad Lieb, director of archeology and field studies for Chickasaw Nation, donated the bottle gourd seeds, which were found during roadwork around a former Choctaw Agency, now an archeological site, along the Natchez Trace Parkway

near Jackson, Miss. A historical plaque marks where the government Indian agent's office and trading post operated from 1811 to 1823.

Growing Hope recently acquired 10 seeds of two rare bean varieties. The Choctaw cutworm beans grown from them produced 916 seeds, and the spotted cane basket beans yielded 2,607 seeds for the program's 2023 seed harvest.

When Growing Hope's seed stores are plentiful, as they were last year, the program distributes seeds to tribal members who apply for them. In 2023, Growing Hope shared 275,000 heritage seeds with 1,400 tribal growers.

The program provides supportive information on how to plant the seeds, harvest the produce and make traditional, healthy Choctaw cultural foods from the yield. This helps Choctaw people continue ancestral agricultural practices on Choctaw Nation Reservation land spanning 11,000 square miles in southeastern Oklahoma and in Choctaw communities nationwide.

Putman, her greenhouse assistant Makynna Sharp, four interns and a seasonal tribal volunteer corps sow seeds, weed, water and harvest what Growing Hope raises on tribal land. Gardens are at Choctaw museum locations and on the Choctaw Nation's Capitol grounds.

The largest garden is in Tuskahoma. Its 20-foot-tall Choctaw flour com (tanchi tobi in Choctaw language), acts as a trellis system for Smith peas (tobi) while Choctaw sweet potato squash (isito) thrive below. This tri-crop combination creates a nourishing, nitrogen-efficient, mini ecosystem often referred to in many Native American cultures as the Three Sisters.

Growing Hope is funded by the tribe and in part through the Center of Indigenous Innovation and Health Equity. Although officially founded in 2015, the Choctaw seed-saving initiative was active long before, according to Ian Thompson, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma tribal historic preservation officer and a registered professional archeologist.

Growing Hope's heritage seeds are connected to and deeply rooted in Choctaw traditional beliefs, religious ceremonies, celebrations, historic matriarchal societal clan structure and ancestral foodways. "If seeds of the cultivar varieties created by the Choctaw ancestors that are growing in our gardens today would have gone extinct, then the important connections

**CONTINUED ▸**

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Choctaw flour corn

KIT BERNARDI

to our culture that they represent could never be replaced," Thompson says.

The Choctaw people's forced removal from their homelands under the Removal Act of 1830, compounded by subsequent colonization, gravely threatened traditional Choctaw ways of life.

During the first waves of removal marches, more than 12,000 Choctaw people were driven from their ancestral lands in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama during fiercely frigid winter months. A third of them died en route to Indian Country in Oklahoma.

Historical accounts report people carrying seeds stitched in their clothing. Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has shared heritage seeds with the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians still living in their homelands.

"The Growing Hope program works to revitalize Choctaw Nation's agricultural

heritage and brings back sustainable health to our families," Thompson says. "The traditional Choctaw diet based on plant-based foods is a world-class cuisine just as deep and vibrant as any other ethnic food worldwide."

Native American cultures nationwide are actively engaged in a healing tribal food movement, says Sherry Rupert, CEO of the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association. "Heritage seed-saving programs and revitalization of traditional tribal agricultural practices protect food sovereignty, perpetuate culture, preserve ancestral foodways and promote health for our people."

In Durant, Okla., the Choctaw Cultural Center's Champuli Café serves visitors and the community traditional foods, such as tanchi labona, which is simmered pearl hominy corn and braised pork, cornmeal Choctaw banana bread and

Choctaw sweet potato squash, with much of the produce grown in the center's Three Sisters garden.

Growing Hope recently partnered with NASA on a STEM project for students attending Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma's Jones Academy in Hartshorne. Choctaw heritage seeds transported last year on the space shuttle to NASA's International Space Station are scheduled to return to Earth in April to be planted in the school's garden. Students will compare the growth of space-traveled, irradiated seeds to earthbound heritage seeds.

Putman attended the rocket launch. "Witnessing heritage seeds join our ancestors in the heavens and knowing that when the seeds return, they will teach us more, fills my heart with hope for my people," she says. "I pray that our Choctaw ancestors are proud of what we have done with their legacy."



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