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# Gardeners fight diabetes with homegrown foods

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FORT YATES, N.D. – “This year was meant to be a planning period for our new gardens grant, but we’re in full swing,” said Aubrey Skye, Hunkpapa Lakota, Native Gardens Project coordinator for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe [Diabetes Program](#).

“I said, ‘I’m going to go for it.’ What better way to find out what we need? And why wait? We’re on the front lines of the fight against diabetes.”

Standing Rock’s gardening project is one of 17 tribal entities that received a grant of about \$100,000 per year for five years from the Centers for Disease Control’s Native Diabetes Wellness Program.

Skye, who has been gardening on Standing Rock since 2002, called on the Rapid City office of National Relief Charities, which has self-sufficiency oriented partnerships on reservations nationwide. Two staffers arrived with tractors to till 120 family gardens, in sizes ranging up to 30 feet by 50 feet, throughout Standing Rock’s 2.3 million acres in North and South Dakota, along with a one-acre community garden in the reservation’s Porcupine District. Skye and his wife, Linda, built additional



*Standing Rock elder Gladys Seewalker held a North Dakota State University Extension Service Gardening Guide, as National Relief Charities staffer Marie Keller tilled a garden in Solen, N.D.*

easy to tend 4-by-8-foot raised bed box gardens for elders.

If an elder is frail, Skye cares for his or her garden himself, on top of running an operation that encompasses the weekly Long Soldier Farmers Market in the reservation's capital, Fort Yates, as well as herb walks, forays to collect traditional Lakota/Dakota gathered foods and collaborations with groups including [Sitting Bull College](#), [Standing Rock Farms](#) (the tribe's commercial agriculture operation), state fish and game departments, state extension offices, [Slow Food USA](#) and the [North Dakota Farmers Market and Growers Association](#).

Skye also holds public meetings so gardeners can report problems. Mainly, they have requested fencing to keep out animals and mowing around the beds to control grasshoppers.



*Aubrey Skye with children who helped weed the community garden in Porcupine, N.D.*

According to John Buckley, diabetes program director, the gardening opportunity was announced to tribal members at reservation district meetings and through media outlets such as the local newspaper and radio station. There was no problem finding participants.

“People here relate to gardening. We’ve gardened since we were put on reservations, and we know it

means good food and good exercise. That’s so important now that diabetes is increasing, along with today’s increased availability of so-called junk and fast foods.”

Tribal members of all ages became involved in both gardening and collecting of traditional gathered foods. Charmayne Eagleman, a Standing Rock elder from Wakpala, South Dakota, recently took children

from a local Boys & Girls Club to harvest tinsila, or prairie turnips, a long-time Lakota/Dakota favorite.

“We hiked a mile south of Porcupine,” Skye said. “The kids were so excited to learn to identify the turnips and tag them with red ribbons for the diggers. I got assigned to be a digger. On the way back, we rested in the shade of a tree, and Charmayne told us stories about the turnips. She said they can up and move when you look away, which is why you must tag them.” Upcoming expeditions will collect wild plums, chokecherries and buffalo berries.

When the tinsila gatherers returned to Porcupine, the kids asked Skye to teach them to set up a tipi. “Sure thing,” he told them; if they did some weeding in the community garden first.

Weeds are the bane of the organic gardener, according to Skye. “You can hand pull them in a family-size plot, but eventually I’d like to see an organic operation here that’s big enough to feed the reservation. You can’t hand weed big fields, though. So, I need to explore the latest agricultural techniques, such as cover crops that become mulch into which you plant food crops. Exciting new ideas are coming out of places like the Rodale Institute.”

So far, it’s been a good, if delayed, growing season in the Dakotas. Snow flurries lasted into June, but once they were over, the abundant moisture the Northern Plains received in spring ended a nine-year drought and helped Standing Rock’s gardens take off.

By the third week of July, corn was thigh-high; squash was in blossom; and beans, tomatoes, chili peppers, cucumbers and sunflowers were flourishing. Most of the seed for the crops came from packets distributed by National Relief Council.

Once the harvest starts coming in, Long Soldier Farmers Market will benefit from a concurrent grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture that provided Standing Rock elders with about \$90 each in vouchers for fresh fruits and vegetables.



*Standing Rock elder Don White showed off his garden*

Skye keeps an eye out for potential vendors in addition to the gardeners he is monitoring for the grant. “If I’m driving along and happen to spot a plot, I pull over and invite the owner, Native or non-Native, to sell at the market.”

The season will be capped by a late-September harvest festival and wacipi that will celebrate foodways past and present. “It’s gratifying to know that something our grandparents did to survive helps us to live in a good, healthy way today,” Buckley said.