

20 Native North American Foods with Stories to Tell

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Indigenous and traditional crops are an important source of food and fiber for people around the globe. Often these crops are resilient to pests and disease or can tolerate high temperatures, drought, or flooding. And while millions of people in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America depend on native crop varieties, North America is also home to many important indigenous crops that need to be protected for future generations.

According to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), since the early 1900s, around 75 percent of the world's plant genetic diversity has been lost. The erosion of diversity of cultivated and wild crops has also been accompanied by a decline in the [nutritional quality](#) of Native American diets and a growing epidemic of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Traditional food ways, culinary skills, ecological farming practices, and entire cultures are also at risk.

Many organizations and farmers are realizing that diversity is not just good for human health, but also for the health of the planet. According to [Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity](#), "a system that is biologically varied is endowed with the antibodies to counter dangerous organisms and restore its own equilibrium. A system based on a limited number of varieties, on the other hand, is very fragile."

In Tucson, Arizona, for example, the nonprofit [Native Seeds/SEARCH](#), co-founded by Gary Paul Nabhan and Mahina Drees, conserves ancient seeds of the southwestern United States and northern Mexico. Their seed bank currently has around 2,000 varieties, many of which are rare or endangered. [Nabhan](#), a renowned agrarian activist and ethnobiologist, is also the founder of [Renewing America's Food Traditions \(RAFT\) Alliance](#), which brings together various food advocates to identify, restore, and celebrate North America's biologically and culturally diverse food traditions. RAFT is also working on creating a comprehensive list of food species grown by the many indigenous and immigrant communities of the continent.

In Minnesota, environmentalist and Native American activist Winona LaDuke initiated the [White Earth Land Recovery Project](#) to help restore the original land base of the White Earth Indian Reservation. The project involves protecting indigenous seeds and other food sources while strengthening the community's spiritual and cultural heritage. A major goal is to overcome type-2 diabetes in LaDuke's Anishinaabe community, where one-third of the population is diabetic. Through her company [Native Harvest](#), LaDuke also sells indigenous American foods like wild rice, corn, and maple syrup.

Similar cataloging and conservation efforts are also being carried out by [Seed Savers Exchange](#) and [Slow Food International's Ark of Taste](#).

To help raise awareness of the rich biodiversity of foods native to North America, Food Tank has compiled a list of 20 foods in the region important to the cultures and food security of North Americans.

[Acorns](#): These wild nuts growing on various species of oak trees were consumed on a daily basis by the Californian natives for hundreds of years. Plentiful, highly productive, easy-to-store, and [nutrient-dense](#), the nuts were [central to their diet and daily lives](#). Acorns are high in calories, magnesium, calcium, phosphorous, and vitamin C.

[American Persimmon](#): While the Asian persimmon is more commonly found at North American grocery stores, a variety of this sweet, pulpy fruit grows in the U.S., as well. The persimmon, the Latin name of which translates to food of the gods, is high in vitamins A and C, fiber, and antioxidants, and is low in calories and fats. Its trees are low-maintenance and the fruit had been used to make cakes, bread, soups, ice cream, and candy by Native Americans and early European settlers. Although not widely commercialized, American persimmons can be found at nurseries that grow heirloom varieties or in the burgeoning edible landscaping projects found in various parts of North America.

[Anishinaabe Manoomin \(Wild Rice\)](#): Wild rice is a semi-aquatic grass that originated in the upper Great Lakes of the U.S. and Canada and has been growing in the waters of north-central North America for millennia. The Anishinaabe people and other Native Americans customarily [hand-harvest](#) the whole grain by canoeing through the rice beds and using long ricing sticks to knock the ripened seeds into the canoes. Commercially available wild rice differs from this variety, as it is described as [cultivated](#) rather than hand-harvested.

According to LaDuke, *manoomin* is the sacred food of the Anishinaabe, who were instructed in their traditional migration story to find the land where food grew on water. Due to the difficulty in growing it and its [low yields per acre](#), wild rice is usually pricier than other grains. However, it is rich in vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and fiber, and contains more protein than most other whole grains.

[Bay of Fundy Dulse](#): This red seaweed variety grows in the intertidal zone of the North Atlantic and is especially prominent in Canada's Bay of Fundy. It was once a popular snack food and an important ingredient in traditional chowders, stews, and creams for many First Nations, Arcadians, and early Scottish and Irish settler communities. Since the 1960s, however, the introduction of commercial snack foods and increasing shoreline pollution have led to Dulse's waning use. However, there are efforts to revive the seaweed. For example, restaurants like Iron Chef winner Vitaly Paley's [Imperial](#) in Portland, Oregon, and chef Evan Hennessey's [Stages at One Washington](#) in Dover, New Hampshire, are helping by adding the seaweed to their dishes.

[Blue Camas](#): The blue camas plant grows along the Pacific Northwest, stretching from the Rocky Mountains of Canada down to California and Utah. The plant consists of blue flowers, and carbohydrate and protein-rich root vegetables that were a staple for many Native Americans of the region. According to professional botanist Joe Arnett, blue camas was the most important garden plant for the natives that lived on hunting, fishing, and gathering. The labor-intensive harvesting processes led to the creation of strong bonds between the harvesters and blue camas lands. Native Americans ensured [sustainability](#) of the plant by collecting only larger bulbs and leaving smaller ones to mature for the next season. The bulbs had to be cooked in a pit oven to make them edible and sweet.

[Candy Roaster Squash](#): This squash—long-lasting and tolerant of winter frost—was first bred by the Cherokee tribes of the southern Appalachian Mountains in the 1800s. It is best and sweetest when fully ripe, and used widely in soups, pies, butters, and breads. In its native North Carolina, northern Georgia, and eastern Tennessee, it is still grown according to the traditional Cherokee practice called Three Sisters, in which squash, corn, and beans are grown together in a field to prevent weeds and retain soil moisture.

[Chaya](#): This evergreen plant is native to the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico and was a staple of the Mayas for several centuries. The plant grows in hot, humid, and bright climates, and it is resistant to insects, heavy rains, and drought. Chaya is rich in nutritional and medicinal properties. It is a source of protein, vitamins A and C, calcium, iron, phosphorous, and many minerals and enzymes. It also helps in digestion, disinfection, regulating blood pressure, and reducing cholesterol levels.

[Chiltepin Pepper](#): Chiltepin pepper is the only wild chili native to the U.S., and it is also known as the mother of all peppers. The chili continues to be an important part of cuisine along the U.S.-Mexican border, where it has been traditionally consumed as food and medicine. According to local food activists at [Local Harvest](#), this pepper is very spicy and pungent in flavor and can be eaten sun-dried, added to cheese and ice creams, or fermented into sauces. It can also be pickled with wild oregano, garlic, and salt.

Cholla Cactus Flower Buds: Desert communities of the southwestern U.S. and northwestern Mexico have been eating cholla buds for hundreds or thousands of years. Cholla harvest season was traditionally a time of celebration and togetherness for the Tohono O'odham people of the Sonoran Desert. Cholla habitats and knowledge of harvesting, preparing, storing, and cooking cholla buds are endangered today as their consumption has been declining since the introduction of modern foods and lifestyles. Cholla cactus plants can survive months or years of drought, and the buds are very high in calcium, soluble fiber, pectin, and carbohydrates. The flavour is akin to asparagus. They are nutritionally beneficial for elders and nursing mothers and can be used for diabetes prevention.

Garambullo: This cactus species grows two to eight meters tall throughout central Mexico. The plant is known to endure weather changes and help in controlling soil erosion and filtering rainwater. It is also a source of food and shelter for wildlife. Its sweet red or purple fruit, which is high in [flavonoids](#) that protect the body against free radicals, can be made into flavored water, liquor, jams, and ice cream. The dried fruit has also been used to make dyes.

Highbush Cranberry: Native to the region around Edmonton, Alberta, in Canada, this four-meter high plant requires little maintenance and can grow without irrigation, fertilization, or any other invasive or intensive farming practice. The berries are eaten raw or used to make jams, jellies, sauces, and fruit wines. A [water-soluble](#) recipe has also been used to treat menstrual and stomach cramps and asthma. Consumption was more common among past generations, and the plant is not widely cultivated today due to low demand.

Mesquite Beans: The mesquite tree of the legume family grows in the southwestern U.S. Mesquite beans and seeds can be ground into meal and used to [make](#) cakes and flat bread, or to thicken stews. Tea is made from mesquite flowers and leaves, the latter of which have laxative and headache-relieving properties. Sap from the trees, when diluted with water, can also be used as an eye wash, sunburn lotion, or an antiseptic. Mesquite beans are a good source of protein, carbohydrates, fiber, and calcium.

Ostrich Fern Fiddleheads: The ostrich fern fiddlehead variety growing in northeastern North America is the only native Canadian vegetable that has been [successfully commercialized](#). It was likely [originally harvested](#) by the Maliseet and Mi'kmaq communities of eastern Canada and Maine. Fiddleheads have a taste similar to asparagus, with an added nutty quality, and [are advised to be boiled or steamed](#) before using in any dish. The ostrich fern is a source of protein, manganese, and iron. It is also high in antioxidants, omega-3 fatty acids, and fiber.

Pawpaws: Of the tropical Annonaceae (custard apple) plant family, the pawpaw fruit is the largest edible fruit indigenous to North America. It has a tropical flavor reminiscent of a mix between mangoes and bananas. It was grown and eaten by Native Americans and early European settlers, and it was even the subject of [folk songs](#). The fruit never managed to catch retailers' attention, partly due to its [short shelf life](#). But there are a handful of [scientists](#) and [growers](#) around North America who are trying to improve its quality. Superior to apples, peaches, and grapes in its content of vitamins and minerals, pawpaws can be used to make bread, pies, jam, ice cream, sorbet, and beer.

Ramón seed: All parts of the ramón tree, including the fruit [seeds](#), foliage, timber, and bark, were once valuable parts of Mayan cultures as food, medicine, animal feed, and wood. The seeds are considered superfoods due to their richness in fiber, calcium, vitamins, minerals, folic acid, and essential amino acids like tryptophan. In times of drought or shortage, they were mixed with corn by the Maya to ensure sufficient food availability.

Roy's Calais Flint Corn: Originally cultivated by the Abenaki or the Sokoki people of Vermont, this maize variety was later adopted by early European settler farmers. It grows well in areas like the U.S.-Canadian border that have cold climates and short growing seasons. It is considered to be more flavorful and rich than other industrially produced corn, and it is used to make cornmeal, flour, and hominy. Hominy is high in niacin and complex protein.

Seminole Pumpkin: This pumpkin species, native to the Everglades region of southern Florida, was grown by the Miccosukee, the Creek, and the Seminole people before the arrival of immigrants. The external shell is so tough that it can only be broken with an ax. This pumpkin is considered superior to any other squash or pumpkin varieties that have been grown by gardeners in the area, due to its tolerance of heat, drought, insects, and powdery mildew. The plant has a [variety of uses](#). The fruit can be baked, boiled, mashed, or used to make pies and bread. Its seeds can be roasted, or hulled and ground. Tender shoots and leaves can be cooked like greens, and the flowers can be fried to make fritters.

Tehuacán Amaranth: This variety of the amaranth crop is indigenous to the Tehuacán Valley of Mexico and was once a staple in the food cultures of pre-Hispanic people from Mexico to Peru. While its use started to fade 500 years ago, the plant has been regaining attention in the past 30 years. Growing in highly arid regions, it is gluten-free, rich in protein, and its leaves contain iron levels greater than spinach. The leaves are used in salads, soups, and as spice when dried. Amaranth seeds are toasted and used in traditional sweets like the Mexican alegría. And when mixed with corn flour, amaranth flour is used to make tortillas, cakes, and biscuits.

Tepary Beans: Originating in the desert of the southwestern U.S. and northwestern Mexico, tepary beans have been important to the diets of desert people like the [Tohono O'odham](#) for generations. They are known to be highly tolerant of heat, drought, and alkaline soils, and they are not suitable to wet conditions and clay soils. White tepary beans are mildly sweet, while the brown bean is earthy in flavor. The beans contain significant levels of protein and soluble fiber, the latter of which helps to control cholesterol and diabetes.

Wild Ramps: These perennial wild onions grow in eastern North America in sandy and moist soils of the woodlands. They have long been foraged by Native Americans as food and medicine, and are even part of folklore. Somewhat sweet and slightly pungent, their edible leaves, stalks, and bulbs can be eaten raw or cooked. A recent surge in ramps demand due to increased visibility in the media, restaurants, and farmers markets has led to unsustainable foraging practices that place the ramps habitat and species at risk. Because ramps grow at a slow pace, their sustainability can be ensured by harvesting only one of every dozen in a patch.
