



Story by Frederick M. Wiseman, PhD/  
Photos courtesy of Frederick M. Wiseman  
and the Vermont Historical Society

# Chasing Seeds

## *The Story of Vermont's Forgotten Abenaki Food System*

THE HOPE IS THAT EVERY VERMONT schoolchild has heard of the Abenaki Indians, and many have probably heard of the Indigenous “three-sisters” garden of corn, beans, and squash. But for a state with such strong associations with farming, most Vermonters have probably given little thought to the state’s ancient and prehistoric agricultural origins. Yet ar-

chaeological remains, combined with early explorers’ descriptions of broad river floodplains covered with crops, provide firm evidence that the Abenakis of the Green Mountain State cultivated and produced corn, sunflowers, beans, Jerusalem artichokes, squash, and other crops, feeding thousands of people over hundreds of years. For many years, I have chased the seeds of these ancient crops,

pursued stories of exotic cultivation techniques, revitalized agricultural ceremonies, and explored Indigenous cuisine to help bring these traditions to light.

The main agricultural crops of various Native American groups in North America are traditionally known as the Three Sisters: squash, maize (corn), and beans. The Abenaki grew numerous varieties of these essential crops. Probably the most well known is Calais (or Roy’s Calais) Corn, preserved by Roy Fair’s Family of Calais, located in central Vermont. There are stories of this hardy variety surviving the 1816 “Year Without a Summer” that saw snow-



Three generations of Abenakis collecting Abenaki corn, pumpkins, and squash with Abenaki-made knives and Abenaki-woven ash-splint baskets.

fall and frost in the middle of summer. While most Abenaki corn varieties are shorter, with smaller cobs than modern varieties, Calais Corn is a relatively tall Abenaki corn variety with long, skinny, yellow and maroon ears, the maroon occurring about once every six plants.

Another Abenaki crop you may know is the Chester (as in the town) Bean, a.k.a. Flagg or Skunk Bean. It is a largish black-and-white-striped bean abundantly produced on long, vigorous vines that get into everything. It takes a lot of cooking but makes a good baked bean or three-sisters soup. Squashes and pumpkins are well represented by the East Montpelier Squash, a large, tannish orange, rounded fruit formed on long, vigorous vines. It was so prolific Abenaki oral history stated that “it could feed a village.” Unfortunately, when I found it growing in Orange, Vermont, it had accidentally been cross-pollinated with blue Hubbard squash. Ever since then, a team of Abenakis and their allies have been carefully re-selecting generations of squash to breed out the blue Hubbard crossing. Everyone who tastes it pronounces it a superb squash.

Abenaki agriculture comprises a larger family beyond the traditional Three Sisters. One of my favorite old Vermont Abenaki crops is the Cambridge Jerusalem artichoke. It is said that the huge groups of the tall, October-flowering sunflower relative that grow along Vermont’s riverbanks are the remnants of old Native-planted stands, perhaps hundreds of years old. These are an ironclad crop for Vermont, but will become pests if given the chance, spreading rapidly by their delicious underground tubers, often called “sun chokes” in today’s produce isles. There are many other rare and little-known Indigenous Vermont crops such as the white-seeded



The Rain Dance at the 2018 Harvest Celebration at the ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center in Burlington.



Practicing the Green Corn Ceremony, the Elder inspects an ear of corn given to her by the Youngest Corn Dancer while the Sun Dancer performs to the right.

Morrisville Sunflower (also found in the Connecticut River Valley); the Hardwick Ground Cherry that tastes bitter, sweet, and sour all at once; and the Curtis Pumpkin from the North-east Kingdom that looks like a largish vase-shape squash but tastes like a pumpkin.

In this pursuit of ancestral food systems, I have met many wonderful Tradition Keepers who hold these precious vestiges and share them generously. Peggy Fullerton of Sagakwa Farm in nearby Piermont, New Hampshire raises more than 10 species of ancient Abenaki cultivars



Traditional Abenaki-style mounds with bean trellises. These mounds are also used to raise corn and squash, and are fertilized with fish.

per year, regularly rotating the mix to not let the seeds in her carefully laden paper bags get old and die. Peggy, like other Abenaki elders, is a wealth of wind, weather, and mountain lore. The time when the snows melt off a distant beautiful mountain tell her to prepare the fields. Peggy is always patient and interested when I bring her a new seed to grow. After the first year, she tells me all about the yield and its similarity to other ancestral Abenaki crops. After the second, she tells me about the prospects for raising it in a larger scale, and after the third year, how it tastes.

The story of Vermont's ancestral food system does not stop with its rare and exotic crops; it includes even more endangered cropping systems. Initial research into Vermont's agricultural history and archaeology suggested that Vermont's aboriginal peoples raised their food in small temporary

fields cleared by cutting and burning the forest, abandoning them after a few years as pests increased and fertility declined. This stereotype was soon demolished. In the spring of 2007, I was discussing Abenaki culture with Chief Luke Willard of the Nulhegan Band and he told me that his family had always raised their corn, beans, and squash in mounds that were fertilized with fish. Upon asking around, I discovered that Abenakis from all four Vermont state-recognized bands did the same. Peggy said, "Fred, stop reading those books of yours and just ask an Indian!" Luke discussed larger platforms with systems of mounds on them and specialized fields that survived and prospered from summer flooding. Along with the crop seeds I was then discovering, these new food system revelations convinced me that the Vermont Abenakis had a complex and ecologically sophisticated mix of



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Winnowing skunk beans. Despite their unappealing name, the black-and-white-striped beans are good for use as baked beans or in soups.



A traditional braid of Calais Corn (a tall, Abenaki variety, the maroon coloration occurring about once in every six plants) ready for hanging and drying.



The bright yellow flowers of the Jerusalem artichoke (October-flowering sunflower relative) are a familiar sight along many waterways in Vermont.

crops and cropping techniques that could be deployed in different regions to produce a bountiful harvest.

Of course raising crops in the Abenaki way does not just entail selecting seeds and preparing fields, it requires asking permission of the “sky beings,” (also known as “the above people” in Native American legends, in reference to the) Sun, Moon, Rain, and Wind to help with nurturing the crops and giving proper prayers of thanksgiving when the harvest is safely stored for winter. Mid and late 20th-century Indigenous Vermonters offered short planting prayers and perhaps an offering of tobacco, with a tradition at Missisquoi (Swanton) of doing a field blessing. Historically, there was one enigmatic written reference to a Rain Dance from Highgate but little more. Fortunately, Abenakis from Nearby Quebec retained a Sun, Rain, and Corn Dance that they taught Native Vermonters in the late 1980s. In 2014, Chief Don Stevens of Nulhegan gave me a CD containing wonderful original recordings of early and mid 20th-century Abenaki songs, many of which could be used in rebuilding Field and Harvest Ceremonies. After seven months of learning these agricultural songs, dances and rituals, as well as gathering local traditional recipes, a dedicated group of Koasek Abenakis performed their first Green Corn Ceremony and Harvest Meal in September 2014. October 2018 saw another, much larger, Intertribal Harvest Celebration in Burlington with speeches by Abenaki leaders and many more dances, songs, and a larger Harvest Dinner.

Many people are continuing the work on rediscovering and reinvigorating Abenaki food systems, treating the Indigenous food system holistically from seed to gardening technique, to ceremony, to cuisine.

A new book, *Seven Sisters and the Heritage Food Systems of the Wabanaki People and of the Chesapeake Bay Region* (2018), brings together information on numerous heirloom seeds, along with describing ancient agricultural systems, ceremonies and calendar. The *Seeds of Renewal* exhibition at the Vermont Historical Society, and ongoing community programs, also aim to expand the understanding of this important project within and beyond Indigenous communities. 🍷

Fred Wiseman, ethnobiologist and activist, is the author of six books on Indigenous New England and has received highest tribal honors for his work in cultural revival by the Missisquoi, Elnu, Nulhegan, and Koas Abenaki Bands and the Indian Township Passamaquoddies in Maine. He is the guest curator for the Vermont Historical Society's *Seeds of Renewal* exhibition.

**JUST THE FACTS**

The Vermont Historical Society's *Seeds of Renewal* exhibition explores the archaeology, history, ecology, and the performance and culinary arts of the ancestral Vermont Abenaki Food System. It is on view at the Vermont History Museum, 109 State Street, Montpelier through April 2019. After that, it will travel throughout the state so that Vermonters can get a deeper appreciation for the Indigenous roots of their home gardens and farm fields. The exhibition is funded, in part, by a Making of Nations grant from the Champlain Valley National Heritage Partnership and support from the Montpelier Community Fund.

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