

## **Arkansas's First Farmers**

Elizabeth T. Horton, Ph.D.

Station Archaeologist, Arkansas Archeological Survey, Toltec Mounds Research Station

Long before Europeans arrived in Arkansas, the Native peoples were farming and cultivating many crops, as well as collecting wild plants, hunting, and fishing. Plant and animal remains recovered from sites throughout the state help archaeologists better understand these sophisticated pre-contact foodways.

Our earliest evidence for domesticated seed crops come from the dry rock shelters. Samuel Dellinger, then University of Arkansas Museum director, collected them in the 1930s. Over the last several decades, archaeologists studied these collections, and learned that some of the earliest domesticated plants used by Late Archaic (5000 to 3000 years ago) people were locally-available starchy and oily seed plants, like; goosefoot (*Chenopodium berlandieri*), sumpweed (*Iva annua*), squash (*Cucurbita pepo* ssp. *Ovifera*) and (*Helianthus annuus*). We know that some of these plants were being domesticated elsewhere in Southeast at this time, because we see early evidence for squash, sunflower, sumpweed and goosefoot in other states as well. By cultivating and domesticating these locally available plants the Native peoples of Arkansas had reliable and storable foodstuffs, which got them through the lean winter and early spring months.

During the Woodland Period, about 3000 to 1000 years ago, the peoples of Arkansas lived in small villages, cultivating these crops. They also cultivated some additional crops such as knotweed (*Polygonum erectum*) erect knotweed, little barley (*Hordeum pusillum*) and maygrass (*Phalaris caroliniana*). We see evidence for these crops at Late Woodland Mound sites, like Toltec Mounds Archeological State Park, as well as elsewhere. The Woodland period peoples of Arkansas added wild fruits and berries, like pawpaw, persimmon, blueberries, as well as wild greens, to their diets, and used other plants as medicine. In addition, they fished and hunted the rich streams and forests, as Arkansans still do today. The bones of turkey, white-tailed deer, many kinds of fish and ducks, as well as turtles and small game like rabbit and squirrel have been found in archaeological sites dating to the Late Woodland period.

Toward the end of the Late Woodland, people also began experimenting with an exotic crop brought into the area by traders; maize, or, as we know it today, corn. Originally domesticated by the Native peoples of Mexico, maize was carried into North America, but didn't become a significant crop in Arkansas until the Mississippian period (about 1100 AD). It took time to adapt maize to a more northerly climate and to learn the best ways to cook it. Maize diets helped support the growing populations and larger sites archaeologists have found that date to the Mississippian Period, such as Parkin Archeological State Park

During the Mississippian period several other crops were also adopted by Native Arkansans; several Mexican varieties of squash, a small seed crop known as Amaranth, the common bean, and tobacco. By 1200 AD, what we refer to today as the "three sisters" (corn, beans, and squash) had become the staple crop of farmers in Arkansas. People continued to

use wild fruits, berries, and fresh greens as a part of their diet, and hunting and fishing were still a vital part of their lives.

An example of a Late Woodland meal from the spring season, (using stored seed and fruits from the previous fall) would be:

Spring salad of goosefoot (*Chenopodium*) leaves with wild violet flowers and strawberries.

Roasted turkey with baked squash and quinoa\*

\*While quinoa is not native to North America, it is the same genus - *Chenopodium* - as our critical woodland crop so it is a good alternative for our native 2000 year old crop.

Instructions:

Bake acorn squash and cook the quinoa per instructions.

Sauté an onion and mushrooms. Wild versions of both were available.

Layer the squash and quinoa with the onion and mushroom mix into a casserole dish.

Add a dusting of ground pecan on top (optional).

Salt to taste. Note: Salt was a commonly occurring mineral from sources such as saline rich springs and plants. However pepper was not available, as it is not native to North America.

Dinner circa 700 AD!