

## **Native American Growing Practices - A Lost Way of Life**

2006. By *Cyndy Crist*, of the Ramsey Master Gardener Diversity Committee

*"We cared for our crops in those days as we would care for a child, for we Indian People loved our garden just as a mother loves her children."* **Buffalo Bird Woman**

Make sure to read **Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden** - a fascinating account of the growing practices of the **Hidatsas**, a tribe with early roots in **Miniwakan, or Devils Lake, North Dakota**, and of life in a northern plains village. Gilbert Livingstone Wilson wrote the book, based on 1912-1915 research he conducted for his University of Minnesota doctoral thesis. In the introduction, Wilson said he "claims no credit beyond arranging the material and putting the interpreter's Indian-English translations into proper idiom. Bits of Indian philosophy and shrewd or humorous observations found in the narrative are not the writer's, but the informant's, and are as they fell from her lips".

The **Hidatsas**, and most tribes in this region of what is now the United States, practiced agriculture - cultivating maize, potatoes, pumpkins, squashes, beans, sweet potatoes, cotton, tobacco, sunflowers, and other plants - centuries before Columbus arrived on the continent! The Hidatsas became relatively isolated (primarily because of conflicts with the Sioux Indians and the advance of white settlers, according to the author). So the author and his advisor believed that, a "carefully prepared account of Hidatsa agriculture might very nearly describe the agriculture practiced by our northern tribes in pre-Columbian days".

**Maxi'diwiac**, or **Buffalo Bird Woman**, was born in a Knife River village, two years after the "smallpox year" (about 1839). She was a daughter of **Small Ankle**, leader of the Hidatsas. Wilson chose to research her, on her son's assurance that she knew "more about old ways of raising corn and squashes than any one else on this reservation".

The book clearly conveys her skills, knowledge, and philosophy (of selecting, planting, cultivating, and harvesting the plants she grew - especially corn, beans, squash (the "three sisters") and sunflowers). She reportedly continued to plant by hoe until almost the end of her life.

However, as Wilson notes, this book is not "an account merely of Indian agriculture. It is an Indian woman's interpretation of economics; the thoughts she gave to her fields; the philosophy of her labors". One reviewer characterized the book as "a model of respectful viewing and learning, as a mirror of the complex way of life of the agricultural Plains Indians, as a chronicle of human adaptation, survival and ingenuity in the face of cultural disenfranchisement". And Jeffrey Hanson, in his introduction of the book's 1987 reissue, describes it as presenting a "cultural relationship with nature that we can all appreciate and from which we can all derive benefit".

Finally, if you need any more enticement to pick up the book, *Organic Gardening* magazine even describes it: "Historical photographs and diagrams of farming techniques, along with actual recipes and Hidatsa vegetable varieties, make this gem of a book useful for today's gardener." Take a peek, and see if you don't conclude that there's still much to learn from traditional American Indian ways of growing and knowing, even in this "modern" age!