



A Taste Of History

In southern Arizona, Mission Garden honors the cultural tapestry that forms Tucson's celebrated culinary heritage

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES

The Tohono O'odham people call it "S-cuk Son" — meaning "at the base of the black hill." In the protected valley, the Santa Cruz River once flowed freely, converging with the Rillito River and enriching the dry Sonoran soil. Stately saguaros stand guard on the desert floor while majestic mesquite trees provide shade from the hot summer sun. For more than 4,000 years, both native and non-indigenous crops thrived in the fertile floodplains.

Today, the region at the base of Sentinel Peak is known as Tucson, and it's one of the oldest agricultural sites in North America.

For thousands of years, the Hohokam, ancestors of the Tohono O'odham people, cultivated this land, growing corn, beans, and squash and harvesting

desert plants. Archaeological records show that maize was grown here as early as 2590 B.C. — almost 5,000 years ago.

As the centuries progressed, additional influences arrived, merging with and adding to the Indigenous cultures. Spanish missionaries brought with them

fruit trees, wheat, grapes, and olives. Mexicans introduced chiles and chapalote corn. And, in the 1800s, Chinese settlers arrived, bringing produce such as strawberries, artichokes, and melons.

With the development of commercial farming, many of these crops disappeared from everyday cuisine. Mission Garden in Tucson is working to revive them, while educating the public on Arizona's long agrarian history and culinary diversity.

MILLENNIA OF GASTRONOMIC DIVERSITY

Situated in the eastern foothills of Sentinel Peak, just west of Interstate 10, Mission Garden is a four-acre agricultural museum that was founded in 2012 and recently celebrated its 10th anniversary. The land on which it is located was once the garden of Mission San Agustin, an 18th-century Spanish colonial mission that is no longer standing.

The crops grown here tell a story of Tucson's gastronomic roots. "The original idea was to create a place that represented the origins of Tucson, and how it became what it is now," says Jesús García, education specialist at the nearby Arizona-Sonoran Desert Museum and vice president of the board of Friends of Tucson's Birthplace, the nonprofit organization that oversees the Garden. "There is a series of cultural layers that is very important to understanding the city."

The Garden comprises distinct agricultural plots that represent the diverse groups who have lived and farmed in the Tucson Basin over time. "The archaeology reveals an incredibly complex and rich culture of people living in this area," García notes. "It takes you back through 4,000-and-beyond years of human occupation and cultivation."

The foraging of cactus fruit, jojoba nuts, and mesquite pods by the desert's earliest dwellers was replaced

by rudimentary irrigation, which brought about the domestication of corn, beans, squash, and cotton. More complex watering systems increased the harvest. Tepary and lima beans became a staple of early diets, while dipper gourds were used as bowls and tools.

Two O'odham gardens reflected changes to the tribal communities that followed the arrival of Spanish missionaries. Native plants, such as huñ (60-day corn), i'hug (devil's claw), and onk'i:wagi (salty greens) gave way to wheat, root crops, leafy vegetables, and fava and garbanzo beans.

"The missionaries and Spanish colonists really revolutionized agriculture here," says Kendall

Kroesen, outreach coordinator for Mission Garden. "Native American crops grew during the summer, but a lot of the plants introduced by the first Europeans grow well in winter, as well. Their arrival introduced year-round agriculture."

Assistant gardener Maegan Lopez has been with Mission Garden for five years. As a member of the Tohono O'odham tribe, she has a strong cultural connection to the garden.

"A lot of the introduced foods were quite a blessing, but they also came with people who had new ideas, new religions, and new forms of government. The Tohono O'odham had to yield to so much change," she explains.

"The humanity and identity of the O'odham drastically changed because of the colonization. Our agricultural practices are fused with the modernization of this country."

DESERT BOUNTY

For many visitors, and even for locals who stop by the Garden for the first time, the amount of crops that flourish in Arizona is eye-opening. The desert is often thought of as a barren landscape where only cacti and tumbleweeds are found.



“People just don’t know the history,” Kroesen says. “The Sonoran Desert is very rich in biodiversity. This is partly because we’re lodged between the Mojave Desert to the west, which gets mostly winter rainfall, and the Chihuahuan Desert to the east, which gets summer rain. We get some of each. That means that plants don’t have to go nine months with no water, which is great for agriculture.”

Many of the crops grown at Mission Garden are considered heritage or heirloom crops. These cultivars were grown prior to the mechanization of farming. For example, white Sonoran wheat is considered to be the oldest wheat in the Americas. It was introduced in Arizona by Jesuit missionary Father Eusebio Francisco Kino in the late 1600s. Drought-tolerant and fungus-resistant, the wheat was well-adapted to the region’s arid environment, but by 1975, the grain was commercially unavailable.

“The concept of commercial and industrialized agriculture has created transgenic crops that are fitted to produce large quantities with the least amount of input,” García explains. “Bringing heritage fruits and vegetables back creates diversity. They are as natural and as close to the source as possible without processing. We have a diversity of wheat, citrus, grapes, pomegranates — everything.”

Reintroducing ancient crops is not only good for health, but it also revives cultural values connected to the plants.

Lopez notes, “These are the seeds and foods of my ancestors. They’re about memory. They’re about taste and feelings and sensations. It’s going back to the simplicity of your senses and how strong they are.”

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

The recent pandemic saw consumers become more interested in knowing where their food comes from and in growing it themselves. Increasing temperatures and frequent severe weather events are also raising awareness of the need for more locally sourced and regionally adapted foods.

“According to climatologists, Tucson is one of the fastest-heating cities in the U.S.,” Kroesen says. “A few years ago, we had three days in the summer where

temperatures hit 115 or 116 degrees, and we’re probably going to have more of those extreme heat events in the future.”

To help promote sustainable and innovative agricultural practices, Mission Garden is planning to create Tomorrow’s Garden. “The idea is to examine how people grow crops, or what will be the best way to grow a garden in Tucson in 2050 with even scarcer water, hotter temperatures, and more extreme weather events,” Kroesen explains.

The Garden is exploring modern technologies such as hydroponics (the growth of plants without soil) and agrivoltaics (farming with solar panels). Plans are still underway for

Tomorrow’s Garden, and Kroesen hopes development will begin in 2024.

For García, Mission Garden as a whole is Tomorrow’s Garden. “Just think about it for a moment. The fact that we are bringing back these crops, that we’re bringing back the cultural values associated with them — it all comes together,” he says. “Once you cover all the cultures leading up to today, it is very obvious that the knowledge we have and continue to acquire takes us into the future.” 🌱

