

Plants, animals sustained region's Native Americans

by Carol Flynn
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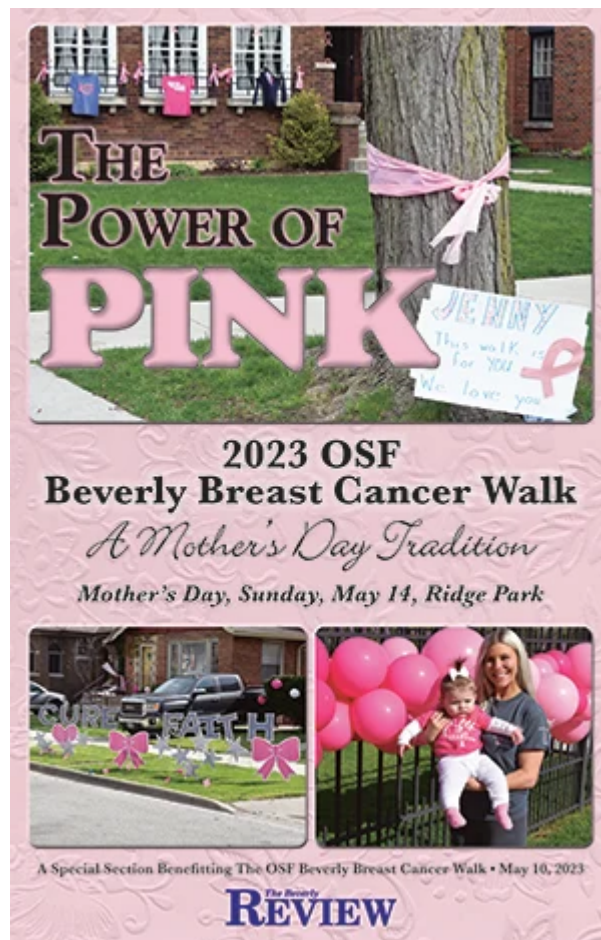


Bison, the proper name for these native North-American animals, were an important resource for Native Americans, who use parts of the animals they hunted. The meat provided food; the skins provided warm clothing and coverings for the winter; and bones, hooves and horns were used as utensils. This picture is of the bison at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. (photo the Forest Preserve District of Will County)

The indigenous peoples of North and South America began domesticating and cultivating native plants for food and other uses 10,000 years ago.

About 60 percent of the food crops grown throughout the world today originated in the Americas. These include corn, pumpkins, sunflowers, wild rice, white and sweet potatoes, tomatoes, peanuts, avocados, papayas, cacao, and many varieties of beans, squash and peppers.

The Calumet Region around the southern part of Lake Michigan, which extended west to include the Blue Island Ridge, and the land to the west and south of the Ridge, abounded with natural resources. Ecosystems in the area at the time that Native Americans lived here included extensive marshes and wetlands, prairies and forests of different types of oak, walnut, hickory, elm, maple and some pine trees.



The Potawatomi people, the last tribe to live here as a group, engaged in all types of food and resource procurement. They hunted and fished; they gathered wild food plants and cultivated crops; and they used other plants and natural items for building and toolmaking.

The seasons set the activities. In spring, the Potawatomi tapped maple trees for sap to make syrup and sugar. In spring and summer, the communities came together to plant and grow crops and to socialize.

In the fall, harvesting crops and gathering wild plants took place. Fishing was a year-round activity. In winter, smaller groups went off on their own, and most of their time was spent making and repairing belongings and sharing stories and oral history around the fire.

Using a bow and arrow, the Potawatomi hunted deer, elk, beaver, small game and fur-bearing animals such as rabbits, squirrels, muskrats and mink. Prairie birds included wild turkeys, grouse, partridges, quail, pigeons and prairie chickens. Waterfowl visited the marshes annually.

In spring, larger hunting parties went after bison. Bears were in the area, and predators such as wolves, lynx, bobcats and the occasional mountain lion were all hunted.

In addition to the meat from the animals, deer skins were used for pants, shirts, dresses and moccasins. Winter clothing was made from bison hides and furs. Plants were used for dyes for clothing. Porcupine quills were used as embroidery needles. Bird feathers and shells decorated clothing, and after the 1600s, beads and silk ribbons from the European traders were used. Red and black paints made from plants were used for facial and body painting and tattoos.

Many types of trees provided resources. The Potawatomi were renowned as canoe builders, using the bark of birch trees. Birch bark was also used to build homes. Floor mats were woven from reeds and cattails, and baskets and bags were made from black ash, hickory bark and animal skins. Mussel shells were used as utensils.

Musical instruments included drums made from hollow logs covered with animal skins, rattles made from deer hooves and wooden or bone flutes.

In addition to Lake Michigan, the system of small lakes (Calumet, Wolf) and rivers and streams (the Calumet rivers, Stony Creek) teemed with fish—trout, white fish and pike. The Potawatomi used spears and nets for fishing.



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The poster features a photograph of five lifeguards in red tank tops with 'LIFEGUARD' printed on them, standing in front of a lake with the Chicago skyline in the background. The text is white and yellow on a red background.

Wild fruit and nut trees and bushes were plentiful in season. Red and yellow plums, crabapples, haws, grapes, sassafras, and pawpaws were all to be found. The marshes and sand hills provided cranberries, huckleberries, strawberries, blackberries, blueberries, whortleberries, raspberries, roseberries, gooseberries, currants and winter berries. The sugar from the sap of maple trees was used to sweeten the fruit. Native Americans used berries in tea, puddings, soups, cakes, muffins and jam.

Nuts included hazelnuts, hickory nuts, white and black walnuts, and beech nuts. Nuts were pounded into flour to make bread.

The wild rice that grew in the marshes all around the area not only was gathered as a food item by the Native Americans, but it also attracted the migrating waterfowl that the Native Americans hunted—ducks, including mallards, shovellers, blue-winged teals and mergansers; coots; geese; and

herons.

Many of the native plants that people consider weeds today are edible and medicinal. Greens that the Native Americans gathered included dandelions, lamb's quarters and stinging nettles. Roots included wild artichokes, milkweed, arrowhead and wild dill. These items were not only extremely nutritious; many possessed medicinal qualities. Other medicinal plants that were gathered included ironweed, culver's root and prairie snakeroot.

The Potawatomi grew corn, beans, squash, peas, melons, pumpkins, onions and tobacco.

Corn was the most important crop that the Potawatomi grew, both for eating and for trade. Corn, squash and beans were called the "three sisters" and were staples of the diet. They were often grown together and combined in dishes. Corn was a sacred food for Native Americans, and it went by different names that all meant "life." It was served at almost every meal in one form or another.

One example of a corn dish from the Native Americans was rockahominie. This was corn pounded to remove the skins, then boiled and served with salt or maple sugar. Today, this is a version of "hominy grits." They also dried corn and ground it into meal to thicken soups and stews.

The Potawatomi developed agricultural techniques including the controlled burning of foliage, which aided hunting as well as killed pests and cleared land for farming; and ridged fields or garden beds that allowed for better drainage.

Food, including meat, fish and vegetables, was dried and stored over winter in birch-bark containers.

Native Americans used tobacco for ceremonial purposes. The manitou spirits were believed to be fond of tobacco, so it was offered to them to ask for or give thanks for help, either as dried gifts or through smoke from pipes. It was also used to seal peace treaties and agreements between tribes and between individuals. Tobacco was smoked in ceremonial pipes, the stem of which was called the "calumet" by the French traders, and this is the origin of the name for this entire South Side region.

The next article in this series will look at games and sports, the fur trade, and other aspects of the lives of Native Americans in the area.