



# Restoring Plant Connections on Tribal Land

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Linda Patrick recalls running in the fields near her home in southeastern North Carolina as a child, stopping to play with the numerous Venus flytraps on the Waccamaw Siouan tribal land. Years have passed, the land has changed, and she doesn't see flytraps anymore. Memories of the land have begun to fade as well.

Darlene Graham and Sue Jacobs, respected elders within the Waccamaw Siouan tribe, have a deep connection to their land, and they are using this connection to discover the ways of their ancestors and to share this knowledge with other tribal members including youth.

The Waccamaw Siouan are called the People of the Falling Star. According to their history, long ago, a meteorite fell and struck the earth, forming a huge hole. The streams in the area flowed into that hole, creating Lake Waccamaw. The tribe has lived in the area for thousands of years. In fact, three canoes from their ancestors have been found in the lake. One is at Fort Fisher, one is at the Lake Waccamaw Depot Museum, and the other is still in the lake to preserve it until its new home is determined.

This connection to the land and the plant traditions of the Waccamaw Siouan has led Graham and Jacobs to create the Healing Green Space, a garden filled with beds of important plants. Tribal members gather here for meditation, relaxation, and healing, and they consider this as a safe haven for the plants as well. They have included a water feature to provide calmness to the soul, and a fire pit, to bring back elements that were important to their ancestors.

The Healing Green Space is a hub of activity on their tribal lands. In addition to serving as a site for talking circles and community events, the space is used for workshops during their annual powwow that takes place at the end of October. In addition, fourth graders from the area and surrounding counties visit to learn about Native American culture. New nighttime, open air programs and workshops are in the works, including a study of the stars, constellations, and moon phases that serve as a planting guide in the sky for the Waccamaw Siouan.

Meanwhile, Graham and Jacobs have been on a quest to learn as much about native plants as they can, and they

are delighted to recognize plants they have learned about on walks in the tribal lands.

“Chief Jacobs of the Coharie tribe says when you honor the plants, they will honor you and show their face,” said Graham. “And that certainly is true. Many plants I didn’t see before appeared after I learned about them.”

“Also, the Creator provides what we need when we need it and medicinal plants speak the loudest,” adds Jesalyn Keziah of UNC’s American Indian Center, noting when medicinal plants are needed, they seem to appear.

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The knowledge this group has gained has been an incredible asset to their community and beyond.

“We are in a powerful time. So many in our community are seeking plant knowledge and want to share it widely,” mentions Keziah. Tribes throughout North Carolina have been eager to share information with each other. The Waccamaw Siouan recently learned about elderberry from the Coharie people.

“The work the Waccamaw Siouan have done has been inspirational to other tribes, and a beautiful example of what can be accomplished,” adds Keziah.

UNC’s American Indian Center and the North Carolina Botanical Garden collaborated last fall to host the NC Native Plant Symposium: Green Roots, Red Resilience. This event offered Native Americans and others an opportunity to learn about indigenous connections to plants.

In addition to knowledge, the Waccamaw Siouan have gained actual seeds from their ancestors. Through the efforts and persistence of tribe members, scientists from NC State University, the University of South Carolina, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture were able to return seeds of corn to the tribe that had been preserved.

“When we got the corn, we were very excited to have the seeds of our ancestors home again. But we were not really prepared,” said Graham. “Our community members quickly gathered and prepared a site for the corn.”

The prepared field was still pretty grassy, but the seeds needed to be planted, so they did just that. They ended up with nine rows of corn that Graham would water – and

when she wouldn’t, she says the Creator sent enough water to sustain them.

Their nine rows of corn provided a bountiful harvest.

“It was as though the corn was saying, ‘I am home,’” said Graham.

The tribe has a recipe from their ancestors for corn meal soup, and Patrick decided to try to make the soup with her grandchildren. They shelled the corn and ground it in a coffee grinder until it was powdery. She cooked it with salt and butter – and they were delighted with the results.

Patrick, Graham, and Jacobs recently met with staff from Garden. As a result of the conversation, the Garden will be sharing knowledge on prescribed fires, plant propagation, historical plant specimens found in the Herbarium, and techniques to grow Venus flytraps in the Healing Green Space. And the Garden is eager to learn about the uses of native plants, traditions, and more from the Waccamaw Siouan.



**Left:** Corn grown with seeds from their ancestors towers over the Waccamaw Siouan tribal land.  
**Right:** The Healing Green Space provides a calm garden for tribe members and a safe space for the plants, too.  
*Photos by Darlene Graham*