

Navajo Woman Brings Long Lost Peach Orchards Back to the Southwest

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Did you know Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado (even the Grand Canyon) used to be covered in peach trees?

PHOTO CREDIT: Reagan Wytsaluc

Centuries ago, Native Americans tended flourishing peach orchards across the Southwest – even in the Grand Canyon!

But like the vast chestnut forests of the Northeast, and the bison that roamed coast to coast, their free-food source was destroyed by the American Army and modern agriculture.

Luckily, **there is a Navajo woman – Reagan Wytsalucy – who is working to restore the lost peaches**, which are said to be sweet, delicious and more nutritious than modern peaches.



The most popular Native American peaches were small, mostly green with a reddish tint when ripe, tart skins, and very sweet insides. They have more calcium, fiber and fat than modern peaches.

When the Navajo people were forced to leave their homeland in the Four Corners area (where Colorado, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico meet) in 1863, General James Carleton ordered his troops to slaughter their livestock, burn their crops (of which peaches were a staple) and massacre any resistors.

Captain John Thompson claimed his troop alone destroyed more than 3,000 “of the best peach trees I have ever seen in the country, every one of them bearing fruit.”

The Army almost wiped out entirely centuries worth of cultivation. Scholars believe the Pueblo communities in the Southwest were the first Americans to receive peach seeds from Spanish sailors in the Rio Grande Valley in the 1500s.

The Native people appreciated and cherished the fruit, passing the seeds from tribe to tribe.



In the winter of 1863, the Navajo were forced to march the “Long Walk” – nearly 400 miles through the frigid desert – to an internment camp on a bleak prairie in eastern New Mexico, where they were expected to assimilate into American culture. But due to poor water and agricultural conditions, the Bosque Redondo reservation was deemed a failure by the U.S. Government in 1868, forcing many Navajo to make the treacherous trek back home.

Luckily, not all Navajo took the Long Walk.

Chief Hoskininni and others evaded capture and hid in a remote corner of the Southwest until it was safe to return.

When the rest of the Navajo returned to Four Corners, Hoskininni gave farmland and animals to each family so they could rebuild their lives, according to Wytsalucy, who is herself a descendant of Hoskininni.

According to family lore, part of the reason he was able to survive was because of the fruit trees hidden deep within canyons, where they were planted for irrigation purposes.

When Wytsalucy didn’t know what to study in college, her father encouraged her to research the fast-disappearing traditional foods of her people.

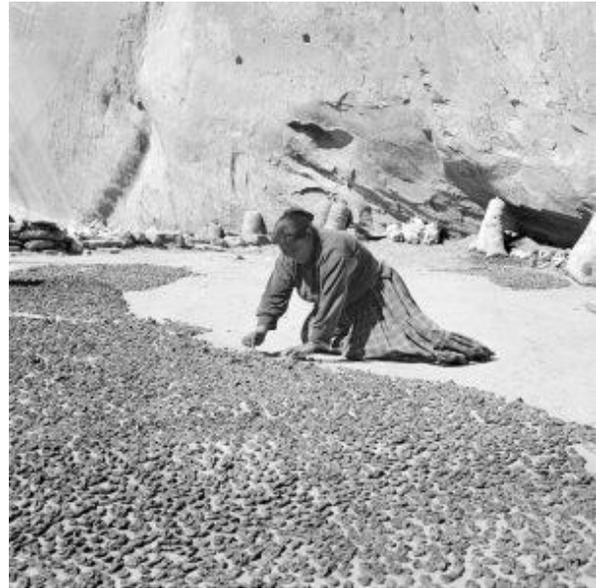
Her father, Roy Talker, ironically owned several McDonald's franchises, but expressed regrets about bringing fast food to the Navajo reservation later in life.

So in 2016, Wytsalucy, her father, and two horticulture professors set out into the Navajo reservation to find the long lost peach trees based on Talker's memories of where he saw them growing as a boy in the 1960's and 70s.

It took three years for Wytsalucy to find her first peach seeds, given to her by an 85-year-old woman in Canyon de Chelly, a lush collection of gorges in northeastern Arizona.

She kept knocking on doors all over the Four Corners area, and eventually tracked down nine more orchards.

She's now preserving the seeds, planting trees at research sites across Utah, working with National Park and recording the stories and traditions of peach-growing from Navajo, Hopi, and Zuni elders, which would otherwise disappear when they pass away.



Capitol Reef National Park in Utah has one of the largest orchards in the national park system.

The elders told her the orchards were managed with very little irrigation. Only young trees were watered. They were planted on mesa shelves and in canyons, where the runoff from mesa tops would flood them during summer monsoons.

Today they are threatened by extreme drought, but luckily they are more drought-tolerant than commercial varieties.

One Hopi elder told her pruning was traditionally frowned upon. “Those seeds, just like the corn plant, are revered as our children.”



CREDIT: Reagan Wytsalucy

In 2019, Wytsalucy became an assistant horticulture professor at Utah State University and is now working with National Parks to help preserve the peaches.

“My hope is that these trees will be returned to the homeland in an abundant form,” she says. “And that they will become a bountiful food resource in our communities again.”



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