

Iti Fabussa: Women's Month

This article is part of a series titled "A Year in the Life." Focusing on the time period around AD 1700, this series follows the traditional Choctaw calendar through a year, with each article providing a glimpse of the activities that our ancestors were up to during each month. This information is excerpted from a book, soon to be published by the Choctaw Nation, which is titled "Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge."

As mentioned in an earlier article, the Choctaw calendar was divided into two parts, separated by the equinoxes. The warm season began with the spring equinox, the point in the year after which the days become longer than the nights. In the Choctaw calendar, the first new moon after the equinox began Tek Ihvshi, Women's Month, which roughly corresponds with April. This month was named in honor of women, the givers of life, who had the primary responsibility for the agricultural crops. Choctaw women were widely acknowledged as being the best farmers in the Southeast.

At the first new moon after the spring equinox, a ceremony called Hashi Atahli Holitobli, Respecting God, was held at the dance grounds within villages. This was a time of praying for the success of crops that were soon to be planted. In the 1700s, Choctaw communities planted three different agricultural fields. The first to be planted, around the time of the equinox, were called chuka osapa, house fields. These were located around and between families' homes.

Year-round, Choctaw families kept the area immediately around their homes clear of brush in the belief that evil spirits could hide in it. This was also an area where food refuse accumulated and composted, adding additional nutrients to the soil. Cleared of brush, enriched by compost, and located where they could easily be watched, these cleared areas were ideal places to plant. After horses started becoming common in Choctaw country, fences were built around the house fields to help protect them. These were made of wooden posts, driven into the ground at intervals, with split hickory or white oak rails. The fences were double insurance. During the growing season, boys kept the village's horse herd out on pasture and tied up during the night to help prevent theft and damage to crops.

The task of breaking up the ground for planting was referred to as okchalhi. Groups of female relatives worked gardens and fields together cooperatively. Traditionally, the main tool they used was simple, ancient, and effective - a digging stick. This consisted of a shaft of hardwood that had its tip sharpened by burning and scraping away the charcoal. The tip of the digging stick was inserted into the ground and pried to loosen the soil. When the tip dulled, it was re-sharpened.

In field preparation, Choctaw women may have employed a technique that involved loosening the soil in a central area and expanding outward in concentric circles. To remove weeds and scrape the surface of the ground, Choctaw people also made garden hoes. Known as chahe, these had wooden handles and blades of mussel shell or deer shoulder blades. Shovels were made entirely from wood. Unlike the metal plow, these Choctaw tools did not turn over the soil, and thus kept the microbial strata that are important for soil health intact, similar to no-till farming. The soft, worked soil was called okchaha. It awaited the day of planting, na pehna holokchi nitak. Into this prepared ground, women planted the seeds of Tanchusi, a small-sized variety of corn that is said to have ripened within just eight weeks of sowing. In addition to the corn, women also planted different varieties of beans in these house fields, as well as African field peas. This began the agricultural season.

A list of works cited in this article is available by contacting the Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department at (800) 522-6170.

Editor's Note: For Iti Fabvssa stories you might have missed please visit ChoctawNation.com and click on History & Culture.



On the right, last season's plant cover has been burned off. On the left, the charred soil has been broken up using a digging stick and a mussel shell hoe.