

# Bihi Hvshi: Mulberry Month corresponds with spring

*This article is part of a series entitled “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 entitled “Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge.”*

In the Choctaw calendar, Bihi Hvshi, Mulberry Month, roughly corresponds with May. As the name implies, this is the time of year when the Choctaw homeland begins to abound in sweet, edible spring treats. Mulberries are one of the earliest fruits to ripen. As the days lengthen and warm, other fruits come into season, including bissa, blackberries, sheki ifvnnvsh, blueberries, biuko, strawberries, and isi itakkon, wild plums. In the past, Choctaw women, girls, and elders went out to gather these fresh fruits and bring them back to their families. The best spots to find many of these fruits were the community’s old agricultural fields that had been allowed to enter a long fallow period. Without tree cover and aided by range fires, the fruit-bearing bushes and shrubs thrived. The productivity of these old fields was so high that, in the right season, a person could collect a meal’s worth of strawberries growing within arm’s reach. Planned fruit orchards were also planted next to some villages, or between groupings of houses. Fresh fruits were eaten raw as a welcome addition to the foods stored dry over winter. Fruits were also dried for later use and cooked in dishes like walakshi.

Not only did Choctaw women pick mulberries during the month, they also stripped off the inner bark of mulberry saplings and began to process it into thread for making textiles. May is also the season when bison really begin shedding their thick winter coats in preparation for the heat of summer. Choctaw women collected the shed wool stuck in bushes or on rough-barked trees, where the bison had rubbed it off. The wool would be cleaned, spun, and made into clothing or bags.

As mentioned last month, Choctaw communities traditionally planted three different types of agricultural fields each year. During Mulberry Month, the largest of these fields were planted. They were known as tanchi aholokchi, places where corn is sown. In English, they are often referred to as communal fields, because of the way they were planted and harvested. The favorite location for communal fields was terraces and ridges with loamy soil. Based on surviving descriptions of the layouts of particular Choctaw towns, many of them had multiple community fields. In fact, accounts from the late 1700s describe the landscape between concentrated Choctaw settlements in all three districts as being mostly cornfield. Fields were sometimes irregularly shaped so that growers could make the most efficient use of patches of fertile soils regardless of the shapes and sizes they happened to be. Ideally, a family worked in a section of field close to their house, but sometimes they had to walk as far as a couple of miles to get to it. At these locations, it was more of a challenge to keep an eye out for deer and other crop predators than at the house gardens. This is the reason Choctaw farmers chose to wait to plant the communal fields until around the first day of May, when the woods had plenty of fruits and other wild edibles to take the pressure off of their fields.

Based on what has been recorded for other Southeastern Tribes, it is likely that the women from each Choctaw family had their own section that they worked in the communal field, separated by a strip of unworked land, or some other recognized marker. Unlike the house garden, there were no fences in these fields. Had a family attempted to construct one, their actions would have been viewed as childish, since these crops were for the community. Communal fields were planted and worked in a spirit of cooperation. Social distinctions were set aside, and people labored as equals. On the day of planting, work began about an hour after sunrise, with the community moving from section to section of the field, getting the seeds in the ground. Men helped the women to plant. The work was accomplished cheerfully, sometimes with storytelling and singing.

First, small hills were made in which to plant the corn seeds, a process known as hopolichi. These corn hills were called ibish. They were approximately three feet wide at their bases and set in rows, with the centers of the hills

about 6 feet away from each other. The evenly spaced rows created between the hills were known as bachali. Within the communal fields, three different varieties of corn were planted. Tanchi Hlimishko, smooth corn, was a yellow flint corn used to make hominy. Tanchi Tohbi, white corn, was used in making bread. Tanchi Bokanli, breaking open corn, was a popcorn, used to entertain visitors.

Because corn is wind pollinated, different varieties growing within 1/2 mile of each other will cross-pollinate, and lose their distinctiveness. To prevent this, Choctaw farmers of later years (and probably during this time period as well) grew the different varieties in fields located in different places.

Alternatively or, probably, in addition to that, the planting of the three corn varieties was carefully timed so that the pollination of each variety was staggered.

On the day of planting, Choctaw field workers pushed four or five seeds into each corn hill and then added a layer of clay on top. This clay layer helped to prevent the corn hills from eroding during a heavy spring rain and washing out the seeds. Through the coming weeks, the community fields would be sown with the seeds of other types of plants. Today, this is known as “sequential intercropping,” a practice recognized for its productivity and efficiency.

The third type of Choctaw agricultural field, consisting of patches of winter squash, pumpkin, and African melon, was probably planted about the same time as the communal fields. These were sometimes located quite some distance from the houses. Elevated, shaded platforms, known as fvla atoni, crow-watcher, were set up.

Older women sat on these platforms during the day, working on artwork and scaring away birds, animals, or hungry boys that tried to enter the patch. The Choctaw varieties of squash grew so vigorously that, even on poor ground, they would outcompete the grass. This made weeding these patches unnecessary. Soon after planting, the corn in the communal fields would sprout, a process known as abasali. When these shoots grew to about 6 inches tall, the number of stalks was thinned down to three per hill, so that competing plants didn’t limit the harvest. The young corn was particularly vulnerable to damage.

By late May, the corn in the communal fields would be about one foot tall and ready for the first hoeing. This activity was called leli. Weeds between the corn hills were chopped up and their roots exposed to the sun. Some of the loose soil with weed mulch would be added to the corn hills to add additional support to keep the growing plants from blowing over in the winds of a summer storm. This work of mounding up the corn hills was referred to as apullich. Fieldwork would continue through the growing season.



Traditional fiber and yarn made from processed mulberry bark.

Photo courtesy Jennifer Byram