

# BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES

In the mountains of western North Carolina, Cherokee foodways have endured for centuries, an integral part of the tribe's identity. NC Cooperative Extension works to ensure that those traditions are not lost.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY LUKE SUTTON

Among the mountains in the Qualla Boundary, traditional Cherokee crops are returning to small tracts of land thanks to the efforts of NC Cooperative Extension.

**I**N THE CHEROKEE LANGUAGE, *to-hi* holds a special significance. The concept most closely relates to what Western cultures refer to as “health.” For the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, however, *to-hi* incorporates a deeper state of equilibrium, one that encompasses all physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a person and community. The Cherokee believe that a person’s physical strength cannot be separated from the land they live on or the relationships they have with community members.

For Ronald “Chumper” Walker, director of NC Cooperative Extension’s Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Center on the Qualla Boundary, *to-hi* is directly linked to the tribe’s ancestral land, rich history, agricultural traditions, and foodways. Like the community members he serves, Walker is an enrolled citizen of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. He grew up in Swain County and spent almost all of his adult life on the Qualla Boundary. Through Extension, he handles everything from community development to turf management, but he really lights up when talking about the potential for local foodways.

“The Cherokee are the original farmers of [the Qualla Boundary], yet we don’t have our arable land anymore,” Walker says. “It’s important to retain our agriculture, even if it means on smaller tracts of land with different methods.”

**FOOD INSECURITY IS A CONCERN THROUGHOUT THE** Qualla Boundary, where there is only one grocery store and many agricultural traditions have either been lost or are in danger of being lost. Walker speaks of big-picture work that links the Cherokee’s rich agrarian history to the tribe’s contemporary landscape in a way that both addresses food insecurity and also promotes a holistic approach to well-being. His goal, he says, is “to create a local food system network that satisfies both our local community and tourism needs — that supports local food businesses and encourages farmers to enter into the market.”

Short-term efforts by Extension’s EBCI Center, such as partnerships with the Tribal Food

## To preserve foodways is to preserve the Cherokee way of life.

The annual Indian Fair gives kids and adults the opportunity to show off their canning skills (above). Each summer, Extension provides chicks to kids as part of the Youth Backyard Poultry Project.

Distribution Program and MANNA FoodBank to deliver food boxes, help provide immediate solutions. Long-term initiatives are centered on providing healthy alternatives to the fast-food lifestyle that threatens the Qualla Boundary. Extension partners with the tribal executive office to provide citizens with garden kits that have included traditional heirloom seeds, apple trees, blueberry bushes, corn, and climbing beans as

well as less common plants, like bok choy. Extension also sponsors an annual heritage seed giveaway that serves more than 800 families and distributes more than 10,000 seed packets to grow heirloom plants like Cherokee tan pumpkin and *sochan*, or green-headed coneflower.

Every initiative that Extension undertakes considers the longevity of Cherokee horticulture.

This intergenerational focus extends beyond simply passing on traditions — food preservation is approached with a goal of adapting to the changing needs and resources of the Eastern Band. This past year, for example, Extension’s EBCI Center partnered with Street Food Institute (a nonprofit based in New Mexico), EmPOWERing Mountain Food Systems, and the EBCI Division of Chamber of Commerce to hold a four-day Food Truck Boot Camp training series.

“By encouraging and supporting our local food scene, we can create a locally grown food demand,” Walker says.

**DURING THE ANNUAL CHEROKEE** Indian Fair in October — the most anticipated event of the year — signs point to where to take prize jams. Community clubs decorate booths. Art and crafts are displayed, showcasing things like



woven rivercane mats. Baskets are filled with an assortment of colorful beans, and heirloom seeds are culled and labeled in educational displays.

A modern adaptation of traditional harvest celebrations, the fall festival is the tribe’s opportunity to showcase, among other things, agricultural, culinary, and artistic excellence. It’s here that the literal fruits of growers’ labor are on display, as well as the success of Extension programs like the 4-H Youth Backyard Poultry Project: For the 15 to 20 kids involved, it’s a chance to show off the chickens that they’ve been raising since July.

Like adults in the community, kids who raise and grow food have access to a cannery to process and preserve their produce. When the new tribal cannery facility opens this summer, it will allow the program to double its production. “It helps our program come full circle,” Walker says. “In the spring, we have seed and sometimes plant giveaways. Summer, we offer growing and harvest education. In fall, we have our Indian Fair showcasing community members’ work, and then the tribal cannery to preserve and store that food.”

Walker believes that in the spirit of *to-hi*, food cannot be separated from Cherokee history and culture. To preserve foodways is to preserve a way of life, and this begins with the youth. This spirit requires year-round preparation and a community effort to honor the cultural history of the Qualla Boundary and ensure that it adapts in order to remain in balance for future generations of Cherokee. **Os**

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