

Micmac Farms:

From Community Garden to Four-Season Farm and Retail Outlet

By Jane Caulfield

Since time immemorial, the Micmac people have lived in the area that is now known as Quebec, Atlantic Canada, and Maine. As in all cultures, traditions change over time, but the tribe works to preserve the ancient wisdom that keeps us in balance within ourselves and in our relationships with all living things.

Starting a community garden was a way for the Aroostook Band of Micmacs to achieve balance. Over many years tribal members were experiencing health problems that rarely occurred in our ancestors, which reflected unhealthy dietary practices and a lack of physical exercise, according to the tribe's Indian Health Service physician. Aroostook is also one of the poorest regions in Maine, and nearly 80 percent of tribal families are below poverty. However, the tribe owns several hundred acres of prime farmland in Aroostook County, which is the most intensive agricultural region in Maine. The tribe responded to the income and health disparities by using its rich land resource and in 2009 planted a large garden to provide healthy, affordable food for the tribe and the Aroostook County community.

The 18-acre farm is located on U.S. Route 1 between Presque Isle and Caribou, Maine. The tribe planted eight acres in fruit and landscape trees, along with strawberries, raspberries and high-bush blueberries. There are about 10 acres of row and cover crops, and the tribe is also propagating seedlings for a five-acre Christmas tree plantation. Last summer, tribal members received vouchers through the Bureau of Indian Affairs to purchase fresh vegetables from the farm, and the farm opened a roadside stand to sell fresh produce to the public.

With that success, the tribe decided to grow the garden into a natural-resource-based economic-development project to create jobs and generate income for its members. The idea came at an opportune time because USDA Rural Development was responding to a groundswell of public support for building local food systems through its Local and Regional Food Systems initiative. USDA Rural Development awarded the tribe a Rural Business Enterprise Grant of \$492,363 in September 2009 to construct two 4,400-square-foot buildings and to place two 2,880-square-foot greenhouses on the site. One building will house a brook trout hatchery and cold storage; the other will have a general store and kitchen for preparing and preserving food. The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife provided technical assistance in the hatchery design and construction, an important part of the project because it will restore a traditional and healthy food back into the community's diet.

The tribe also received a USDA Agricultural Marketing Service Farmers Market Promotions Program grant for training to produce, manage, and market agricultural products and to establish an electronic benefits-transfer program that will help distribute fresh produce to recipients of food-assistance programs. The total project, including matching funds from the Aroostook Band of Micmacs, is more than \$800,000.

Micmac Farms is evolving from a community garden into a four-season agricultural business. This project will serve the 1,200 members of the Aroostook Band of Micmacs, along with local residents and visitors. The general store will sell fresh produce and fish from the farm, provide kiosk spaces for local farmers and artisans, and sell native-made crafts. The store will also offer a simple, healthy menu of salads, soups, and chowders, which will add significant value to the farm's fish and produce. Partnerships with other local farms will augment the offerings. A web site will allow people to order products for local delivery or shipping throughout the U.S. Construction is nearly complete, and the general store will have its grand opening this summer. This is a project rich in potential. The tribe envisions it as an expression of its ties with the Earth and the community—and as an example of true Micmac hospitality. 🐟