



## **Dakota Digest**

Native Gardens Project

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**By Jackelyn Severin**

*Diabetes is a growing problem in the United States especially among Native Americans. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention says Native Americans are two times more likely to have diabetes compared to non-Hispanic whites. The Native Gardens project is designed to help combat the growing problem of diabetes among American Indian populations. Standing Rock is the one South Dakota Reservation to receive a Traditional Foods Grant through the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. The grant provides 500-thousand dollars over five years for the Native Gardens Project.*

Phillip Farrell lives on hill about five miles South of Wakpala. On this windy spring morning he is getting his garden tilled as part of the Native Gardens project.

“Ya, it’s something I really wanted for a long time and I really appreciate it,” says Farrell.

Farrell does not have a shovel and says it would have been difficult for him to get a garden started on his own but he loves to garden and loves to cook food he has grown himself.

“And I prefer that because I’m a diabetic and this is better than processed food I guess.”

American Indians are 3 times more to likely to die from diabetes than the rest of the population, something Aubrey Skye says needs to be changed.

“Diabetes is an epidemic here in Indian Country as is, as it is, you know everywhere I think now days throughout the country and so we’re, we’re trying to turn that around from a holistic approach,” says Skye.

Skye is the Native Gardens project coordinator for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. He says the goal of the project is to improve the diet of those living on reservations by making locally grown and traditional foods more accessible.

With the help of National Relief Charities Skye and his crew are going from community to community and door to door on the Standing Rock Reservation tilling individual gardens. They will have over 150 gardens tilled when they are done. One garden they tilled was for Fritz Eagleshield of McLaughlin.

Eagleshield says, “I usually put in a bunch of cucumbers so I always have a lot and those zucchini things that come out, I water the heck out of it so it will really come out good and then I just give them away too.”

Eagleshield says he loves to garden and appreciates the help in getting his started especially now that he is getting older.

“I usually do it myself but working with a shovel is a little bit too much.”

Eagleshield and his wife Patty have seven kids and 27 grandchildren so he says every little bit helps.

“Usually this here is the house to gather at any activities going on. Whether it’s the powwow or whether its holiday season, they all come gather round here,” says Eaglesfield.

National Relief Charities also gives out hand tools and seeds to get those in the Native Gardens program a head start on planting.

Tammy Blackbox has helped with her church garden for the past two years but this is the first year she will have a garden of her own and she has big plans for it.

“Well actually I’m going to involve some of the Sunday school kids to help put in the garden and then whatever we grow we’re going to help out with the church food bank and that sort of thing,” says Blackbox.

Involving kids is something Robert White Mountain plans to do through the Native Gardens project as well. White Mountain has already started his own community growing project in Bear Soldier which is just south of McLaughlin. White Mountain worked with the boys and girls club to involve kids in planting and taking care of an orchard in the bear soldier community.

“We have apples, we have four different kinds of apples,” says White Mountain, “We have two different kinds of plums, the big plums. We have two different kinds of cherries.”

White Mountain sought out help from Aubrey Skye to get a community garden going in Bear Soldier as well. White Mountains sees a vision for the orchard and gardens as a place of healing for all Native Americans. He says involving children in taking care of the gardens will give them something to do and help steer them away from alcohol and drug use.

“This is a way that the kids can give them some kind of purpose in life. Give them hope, say ‘you know what I can watch this plant grow and watch this food grow and I’m going to harvest it and I’m going to take it home and my family is going to eat it.’ That gives them purpose. It gives them a reason to get up in the morning you know rather than what is now.”

White Mountain and Aubrey Skye hope returning to traditional and locally grown food can bring the Native American population back to the healthy state they once were in as hunter-gatherers roaming the northern plains. They also hope these grassroots efforts will make life better for those on reservations.

Skye says the Native Gardens Project is really about helping tribal people remember the connection they once had to the land and the Earth’s resources.

“I mean we’re all connected if you really think about it,” says Skye, “You know its not only native people but non-native people as well and I think once we realize that it’ll have a big effect on the way things are coming about in the future.”

Skye says its going to take time to get Native Americans back to the state of health where they were traditionally but he has a positive outlook and says he’s going to keep working to bring good food and build community on the Standing Rock Reservation.

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