

Children of the Corn

[Travel](#)

| By [VERLYN KLINKENBORG](#)

| September 21, 2011, 9:30 pm



Photographs by Jesse Chehak

By late summer, most of the corn in America is head high and bristling. The stalks stand shoulder to shoulder like an army without rank, their sharp-edged, swordlike leaves forming a nearly impenetrable wall. A modern cornfield would have rebuffed Cary Grant in “North by Northwest” because there are no rows to speak of, only a dense lattice of intersecting spears. This corn — grown by the tens of millions of acres — has been genetically engineered, altered by having stacks of apparently desirable traits wedged into its genetic code. Saving the kernels of engineered corn in the fall to plant in the spring is both illegal, because of company patents, and largely irrelevant, since the plants they yield, which contain a packet of foreign genes, won’t necessarily resemble the parent crop. Nearly all the corn you see anywhere in our nation of corn is this year’s model, new and, so they say, improved.

Genetically modified corn is the path industrial agriculture has chosen — a profoundly controversial one. But a growing movement of gardeners and small farmers is keeping alive the genetic diversity that modern agriculture has rejected.

It’s a movement committed to growing and saving heirloom seeds, traditional varieties that, in many cases, have only narrowly survived.

In July, I visited a cornfield that gave survival a new meaning. It was on the Tuscarora Reservation, just northeast of Niagara Falls, N.Y. A modern commodity corn farmer would have laughed at it from the air-conditioned cab of his \$350,000 combine, and even a backyard gardener growing sweet corn would have found it puzzling. The rows were set wide, and the soil had not been hand-weeded, sprayed or “cultivated,” which is

the name for mechanical weeding. It had been a dry season in the Niagara frontier. The cornstalks were waist high, and the leaves seemed to have opened their arms to the sun in a delicate arc. The tassels — the organs of germination — had barely begun to form.

I had the advantage of knowing what this field — part of a Tuscarora Community Supported Agriculture project — would eventually yield; otherwise I, too, would have been doubtful. Earlier that morning, I'd stopped by the office of the Tuscarora Environment Program. Neil Patterson Jr., the director there and co-author of a pictorial history of the Tuscarora Nation, handed me an ear of Tuscarora corn.

You may be thinking of Indian corn, picturing the ornamental, multicolored ears that seem to have been bred for Thanksgiving centerpieces. Or if you've spent time in the Southwest, an ear of Hopi blue corn may come to mind.

And while you contemplate those different types of corn, let me say how hard it is to see the antiquity in living agricultural plants, or in the seeds of such plants. It's hard to visualize the antiquity in any plant, for that matter. A venerable redwood daunts you with its size, not its age, and when you stand beside a bristlecone pine — leaning along with it into the Utah wind — only the knowledge that it may be 5,000 years old keeps it from looking like rooted driftwood.



Cause cob The corn, here braided into strings, has been replanted continuously by the Tuscarora tribe since they lived in what was not yet the Carolinas.

The same is true of this corn. It has been grown by the Tuscarora since they lived in what was not yet the Carolinas, and for who knows how long before that. During the four-year Tuscarora war — which killed more than a thousand American Indians and settlers before its end in 1715 — the corn traveled with the Tuscarora in their episodic exodus from the South, through Pennsylvania, and into New York, where the tribe was adopted as one of the Six Nations of the Iroquois in 1722.

Tuscarora corn flourished until the boom in highly mechanized industrial agriculture that began in the 1950s and then, like so many breeds and crop varieties across the country, it dwindled until only a few families were

still growing it in the traditional way. Although the Tuscarora are showing a renewed interest in their corn, the whole year's harvest could hang, braided in the husk, from a few rafters in a barn that used to belong, until his death in 2009, to Norton Rickard, a Tuscarora elder who devoted himself to keeping the knowledge — and the corn — alive.

Most corn narrows at both the tassel and stem ends.



Natural selection Strings of Tuscarora corn, 40 and 50 ears to a braid, are hung from rafters, where mice can't get them.

The ear Neil Patterson put in my hand was not the least bit bulbous. The stem end was wider than the rest of the ear. A few rows of kernels above the stem, the ear's circumference shrank and remained nearly constant until just before the tassel end, making it without question the most phallic ear of corn I've ever seen. It was longer than even the most up-to-date field corn of 2011. Its kernels were laid out in straight and regular rows, but they were enormous, like teeth in the overfilled mouth of a giant. They were also the color of teeth that people used to call white, before the movies and television changed our ideas about teeth. Each kernel was filled with what looked like white corn flour.

What all of this said to me was "selection" — the careful setting aside of ideal ears for next year's planting, year after year, generation after generation, century after century. The way to assess Tuscarora corn is not to gauge its difference from the genetically engineered corn being grown in fields a few miles from the Tuscarora Nation. Gauge its difference instead from the species — or species plural — from which maize originated as long ago as the oldest bristlecone pine. It is a long way, geographically and temporally, from the tiny ancestral ears of Mesoamerican corn to Tuscarora corn. Embedded in the ear I was holding was not only the tremendous adaptability of *Zea mays* but also the will and the needs of a people, expressed family by family.

To call Tuscarora corn an heirloom variety is too simple. The word "heirloom," as it's used now, implies a broad inheritance from the past, the general release to the public of a plant variety that was once privately developed or has become commercially obsolete. A surprising number of heirloom vegetables listed in seed catalogs today were listed in seed catalogs decades ago until they were supplanted by later commercial introductions. And many heirloom varieties, of course, were homespun types developed or kept alive by one gardener or another until the boom in heirloom gardening over the past decade or so.



Still standing A structure on the Tuscarora reservation, where the corn flourished until the advent of industrial farming.

But Tuscarora corn grown on the reservation has been passed down through a closed community and is sold nowhere. And within that community it has never been wholly supplanted by another corn. It is the Tuscarora corn, still vital to the culture — the corn in corn soup, in corn bread. It is still roasted, dried and ground, or prepared by boiling it with hardwood ashes. It's the corn at the heart of the Tuscarora Husking Bee, the corn whose husks are then braided by strong thumbs into long strings — 40 and 50 ears to a braid — and hung aloft where mice can't reach it.

It's easy to imagine Tuscarora corn somehow anchoring the tribe, which has been agricultural for much of its history, but that misses an essential part of its value. "It's transportable," Patterson said — a wealth, when dried and shelled, that is easily moved, easily transplanted, easily regenerated. Picture the Tuscarora carrying corn along with them on their long journey northward in the early 18th century. The trail they left behind them would have included a series of cornfields not very different from the one I saw. In the history of the Tuscarora, there is an unbroken garden leading from the past to the present, for the only certain way to ensure the vitality of this year's seed is to bury it and wait for it to come up as next year's seed.

SOURCE: <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/21/children-of-the-corn/>