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Rancocas Nature Center Historical Garden makes history

By Toni Price, correspondent

Do you know what a Jefferson bean is? Have you ever eaten a White Bush Cymlin? Could you locate an herb in your yard that helps get rid of poison ivy? Have you ever met the Three Sisters?

All of these can be found at Rancocas Nature Center's Historical Garden in Westampton, which was planted to honor the former residents of the park — the Lenni Lenapi, Quaker farmers, and free African Americans from adjacent Timbuctoo circa 1700-1850.

Major research was conducted from Monticello, Bartram's Garden and Landreth Seed Co to determine what crops would have been grown here by the various inhabitants, and seed varieties were sourced from there as well.

The earliest residents, the Lenni Lenape, were known for planting the Three Sisters, which was an interplanting of beans, squash and corn. The three crops have a symbiotic relationship because the beans provided nitrogen for the soil, corn stalks offered a natural trellis support, and the squash leaves served to hold moisture in the soil.

Nutritionally this combination of carbs from the corn, protein from the beans, and squash seeds offered fats while the fruit itself served up many vitamins. White Bush Cymlin is the squash type that was grown.

The Quaker farmers at what is now Rancocas Nature Center brought many English farming techniques that were not suited to the area, so the Three Sisters probably helped them to survive in the early days. But they were also influenced by gardening knowledge from John Bartram and Thomas Jefferson, so Jefferson beans (known today as hyacinth beans) provided plenty of protein for them.

Whippoorwill cow pea, another bean-like plant that is fed to animals today, was also very important. Virginia white gourdseed corn was the one of choice for gardens in our area, but we would also feed this to animals since it lacks the sugar content we now are accustomed to.

Greens of all types were planted in the 1700s and 1800s at the site, including bath cos lettuce and Swiss chard.

Timbuctoo residents were influenced by many Southern and Caribbean vegetables. Cow's horn okra, Georgia rattlesnake watermelon and sweet potatoes were grown in the area. Spicy hot peppers were also included in free African-American gardens. Georgia collards and many nutritious spinach varieties were important as were various types of beans for protein.

The settlers in our area also cultivated many important herbs, including clary sage for an eye wash, jewel weed to deal with poison ivy, mints, thymes and sages for seasonings, etc. Flax was planted to be woven into fibers for clothing, and many flowers and plants provided colors for dyes.

All of the former residents of what is now Rancocas Nature Center also foraged for wild plants and animals, including wild grapes, wild strawberries, acorns, wild rose hips, high bush blackberries, etc.

Most of the plants listed above can be seen at the historical garden until frost. Come on out to see them and many other beautiful, educational areas at Rancocas Nature Center's Annual Garden Day Open House from noon-4pm on Aug. 7.