

Navajo Nation Gardening Challenge to Unite and Empower Navajo families

Written by Staff Reports
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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Reconnecting Navajo families through self-reliance, food sovereignty, and organic gardening is hard work.

Navajo Nation Vice President Jonathan Nez knows firsthand about the intensive labor of farming. Each year, his family gathers to plant crops on the family farm.

This family activity provides unity, exercise, empowerment and self-sufficiency, he said.

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On June 4, the Navajo Nation Gardening Challenge was launched, beginning with a garden planted at Vice President Nez's residence in Window Rock.

Volunteers from the Northern Arizona University Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals, Tolani Lake Enterprises, Little Colorado River Watershed Chapters Association, Navajo Nation Youth Council, and the Youth Conservation Corps from Lupton assisted with the daylong activity.

"We're out here to start our experiment with traditional and modern ways of gardening," said Vice President Nez.

The neighborhood was a beehive of activity, as trailers delivered compost and organic mulch material. Three raised garden beds measuring 4-feet wide by 20-feet long were dug, along with a portion of the yard designated for a cornfield.

The double-dug lasagna technique was implemented, consisting of layers of cardboard, compost, mulch, and dirt, utilized to create three garden beds.

Joe Costion of Ashokala Gardens in Show Low was among the volunteers who helped with the new garden.

"Double digging is really good for enhancing the soil immediately to get greater productivity for garden vegetables," he said. "Something as simple as providing a mulch on top of the soil really does retain the moisture in the soil for plant growth."

Assisting him was Jonathan Yazzie of Tolani Lake Enterprises, who said he has volunteered and assisted Navajo families with farming for more than 40 years.

"In the past two months, I did 25 gardens, 26 with this one. I also have a 20-acre farm in Sand Springs. I did about 20 chapters this year," Yazzie said.

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Vice President Nez praised Tolani Lake Enterprises and the numerous farmers, gardening programs, and farming organizations across the Navajo Nation that have maintained the ideals of food sovereignty for countless years.

“Thank you to our Navajo people that are maintaining gardens and farms. We appreciate the continuation of subsistence farming for our future generations,” he said. “We must return to the basic family tenets of helping one another and being self-sufficient.

“There are many teachings embedded in farming, which brings together young and old, immediate and extended families for the objective of growing food,” he added.

Vice President Nez’s garden consisted of three garden beds of vegetables and a small field composed of the Three Sisters: corn, beans, and squash. A drip irrigation system was also installed for watering the garden.

The Navajo Nation Gardening Challenge encompasses the efforts by the Begaye-Nez administration to strengthen Navajo families, while teaching the importance of Navajo language, culture, and tradition.

A generational paradigm shift toward self-reliance, defined by the Navajo philosophy of t’áá hó ájít’éego, is the ultimate goal.

“True sovereignty is the ability of a nation to feed its people. This is especially true for the Navajo Nation because much of our 27,000-square-miles of tribal land is fertile,” Vice President Nez said.

Office of the President and Vice President will distribute non-genetically-modified seeds to interested families who want to plant a garden this season.

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The seeds were provided by Tolani Lakes Enterprises, and NAU ITEP provided the accompanying brochure that outlines basic gardening tips for the novice planter.

The challenge was issued and Vice President Nez encourages Navajo families to pick up the gauntlet and plant a garden. The OPVP website will provide a list of various tribal gardening and farming programs across the five agencies for technical assistance.

Seeds are available and will be distributed at OPVP. Call Chris Bahe at (928) 871-7001 for more information, or stop by the office to pickup a packet.