WOODLAND INDIAN PERIOD

1,000 B.C. TO A.D. 800

In the Archaic Indian Period, people cleared the forest mainly to aid in hunting. In the Woodland Period, the primary use of these clearings was for agriculture. Woodland people had discovered that the most fertile clearings were those in the floodplains (low land that is flooded during times of heavy rain). This is where they did their gardening. Women now saved the seeds of their best plants in the autumn. Then they prepared the soil and planted those seeds the next spring. This process of seed selection brought about changes in the plants and the fruits they produced. Seeds of the fattest, juiciest squash, and of the largest sunflowers, were selected.

Wild Sunflower

Domesticated sunflowers produced large seeds which were crushed for oil.

Squash was probably the first plant to be cultivated by Georgia Indians.

The leaves of the poke weed were eaten as greens by the Indians. These leaves had to be cooked before they were eaten. Poke weeds grew wild in the cleared fields.
 MISSISSIPPIAN INDIAN PERIOD  
A.D. 800 -1540

Mississippian Indians grew many kinds of vegetables in the fields around their villages. They also hunted, fished, and collected wild plants in ways similar to their ancestors. Sometimes there would be an extra good year when much food was produced. During these years, the villagers would store some of the surplus food in community storehouses.

The most important cultivated plants in the Mississippian period were corn (maize), beans, squash, and pumpkins. Because of the abundant and reliable food from these plants, the people were able to live in large, permanent villages. How did the plants come to be domesticated (controlled by man) and what was their place of origin? Corn, beans, squash, and pumpkins all grew wild in Central Mexico between 8,000 and 4,000 B.C. Mexican Indians began to collect these wild plants for food. Over many generations, they learned to select and plant the better seeds.
Plants were gradually changed to be more productive (larger and easier to grow).

As the plants were improved, they were adopted by Indians in many parts of North America and South America. By the time corn reached southeastern Indians in the Mississippian period, it had become very different from its original form.

Corn, beans, squash, and pumpkins grew well together. The corn stalk provided a pole for the bean vines to climb, the corn leaves made shade for the squash and pumpkins, and the squash and pumpkin vines crowded out many weeds. Mississippian people planted these four plants together in "hills," rather than separating them in rows as do modern farmers.

The large ear on the left is Southern Dent Corn, which was grown by Mississippian people in Georgia. It is called "dent" corn because of the slight dent found in most of the kernels. The small ear on the right is the wild ancestor of modern corn. It grew in central Mexico about 4,000 B.C. This wild variety is now extinct, but we know what it looked like because examples have been found by archaeologists in dry cave sites in Mexico. Both ears are shown actual size.
Archaeologists learn what plants people grew in the past by studying the burned seeds they dig up or the pollen in the soil.

Because house no. 1 had burned, the remains of vegetable foods that were being prepared for an upcoming meal survived. Vegetable material will stay preserved much longer when it is burned. As we said earlier, some of these vegetable remains were sent to a botanist at a distant university for study.

The charred remains of a basket were found in one corner of house no. 1. It contained 14 corn cobs. Indians made baskets in Georgia for thousands of years. Their baskets came in many sizes and shapes. The one we found in house no. 1 was probably used for collecting and storing corn from the surrounding gardens. This basket was made from strips of common cane. Cane like this is found along rivers and streams all over Georgia.
We are family...

Take us home!

It's easy. Just get one of those bags, put a label inside...

... and then one small scoop of each of us (we don't like to be crowded!)

Plant us next Spring or just keep us as a reminder.
Cornelia
I bet you’d never guess that I’m over 7,000 years old. I just get better with age! I was born in southern Mexico. I’m the tall one in the family. Sister Bea N. leans on me as she grows. Native Americans knew how thrifty I am. They saved me after the harvest and I fed them all year. This let them live in large villages without starving.

Bea N.
I’m the generous one, leaving nitrogen in the soil for my sisters to grow strong. I also provide amino acids that sister corn lacks. When we sisters are combined in a diet, my aminos enable humans to make proteins and niacin.

Squashella
We sisters get along great by helping each other out. My big, bountiful leaves keep the ground around us shady, moist, and free of weeds. That makes us all happy.