

Teach your children

Older generation works hard to share with younger generation traditional ways of root digging.

Story and photos by
Shannon Keaveny

The three-year-old Early Childhood Education student buried her hands deep in the soft dirt and pulled up a golfball-sized lukwsh.

Her face lit up.

"Look mommy, I got one," said Anessia Sam enthusiastically.

She, then, brushed off the dirt, ripped off the plant foliage, and dropped the biscuit root into her wapas, a pouch attached to her waist.

Sam eagerly began loosening the soil again with a kapn, a metal root digging stick, in hopes of finding another.

The little girl was a participant in one of the many excursions to Webster Flat, a traditional root digging haunt for the tribes, with children of all ages this year.

Webster Flat, a barren, rocky grassland, is home to some of Warm Springs finest roots. On this day, Sam and her classmates are digging for biscuit root and bitterroot. Tribal members have been digging at Webster Flat with their families for generations.

Still, some older tribal members worry the new generation won't have the opportunity to learn from their parents. Some of those people are taking matters into their own hands.

Two sisters, Roma Cartney and Lucinda Green, who were raised like "oldtime Indians," are active in providing community opportunities for youth to learn the traditions of the root festival, in case they aren't learning it at home.

Each year Green hosts a root feast for children where they learn the tradition from beginning to end.

"Everyone is invited," said Green.

ECE makes sure their young students get an introduction to rootdigging.

"A lot of parents don't know how anymore or just don't take the time to teach their children," said Cartney.

Creating community opportunity

This year Green and Cartney took out 12 kids of all ages to Webster Flat and Simnasho. Many are foster children who come from dysfunctional homes where they wouldn't otherwise have the opportunity to learn these traditions.

Green and Cartney teach them what their parents taught them.

Before the children dig, they say a prayer, then they dig one root of each plant. Afterwards, the kids gently put back the dirt and pat it down.

Returning the dirt to its location is thought to help next year's harvest.

Later, when the roots are peeled at home, the peelings are also returned to the location they were dug.

While digging they sing songs from Green's father.

"I really want them to know the ceremony, not just the roots," said Green, "because it's our life."

"Children should have no choice when it comes to cultural things. This comes first," she added, "They are part of it, that's what I want them to understand."

The children stay up late preparing for the feast, peeling by hand the bitterroot, biscuit root, and other roots.

"You are really thankful for the food after you have been digging and peeling. It makes them realize how much work it is to put on a root festival," said Lucy Suppah, a participant at the children's root feast.

Children should have no choice when it comes to cultural things. This comes first.

Lucinda Green

The next day the feast is prepared. The young children learn to spear the skin of the salmon and angle it over the fire. They help prepare the roots. They serve the food.

Before the feast they are asked if they have anything to say so they can learn to show appreciation for the food. A shy little girl quietly says a few words.

"Lucinda's dad said if you have a mouth and learn how to talk, then you can share something about being thankful," said Suppah.

Most roots are lightly boiled, says Cartney, with salmon or some other type of seasoning added.

Ground roots can be laid out in the sun on a sheet to dry. The flour can be used to make "Indian cookies," which are also cooked in the sun. Indian cookies were a popular traveling treat in the old days. Camas, harvested later in the summer, is barbequed under the ground.

Roots can be frozen in zip lock bags or dried in the sun and stored in a tin can. Camas can be cooked and canned.

Roots are a valuable source of vitamin C, iron, calcium, and protein. Cartney feels this is one reason younger generations should not fully succumb to the modern convenience of prepackaged ready-to-eat food.

"When our people ate traditionally, we didn't have the health problems we have now," said Cartney.

Cartney and Green feel they need to provide these opportuni-



Roma Cartney gives a rootdigging demonstration to an Early Childhood Education class at a recent Webster Flat outing.



Kiani Picard, 3, digs up a luksh at Webster Flat.



A young girl enjoys the Annual Root Festival for children at Lucinda Green's house.



Anessia Sam, 3, gleams with joy after pulling up a luksch at Webster Flat.

ties or the heritage of their people could be lost.

"Our biggest concern is that the newer generation continues to grow with the traditions and passes them on," said Cartney.

When Cartney and Green were young, the old people were present and the kids constantly accumulated the elders teachings. These days many kids are missing out on these very important teachings, that are such a vital part of who they are.

"I don't remember our traditions as work when I was a kid, but just as a way of life," she said.

Cartney insists the kids always enjoy it. She enjoys seeing the laughter and joy in their faces when they pull up a root.

Meanwhile, she says, kids learn many valuable lessons from tradition like the ethic of work and how to exercise. There is more to life than television and video games, she adds.

That's why, on days like the ECE outing to Webster Flat, Cartney patiently instructs a group of kids' surrounding her on how to use their kapn.

The little kids spear the ground near the biscuit root, pull the tool down, like a lever, and loosen the soil.

All the children have wapas' attached to their waist that Cartney sewed herself.

"The hard part," she said, "is keeping them interested, not just in the roots but in the song and dance too."

"I just pray for the parents and grandparents that they just love their kids by teaching them. There's so much knowledge in the old people that can be passed on to them," Cartney added.

Origin of the Root Feast

According to Ella Clark's book, "Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest." Excerpt taken from George Aquilar's book, "When the River Ran Wild."

Chief Jobe Charley, a Kiksht Chinookan from the Yakama Indian Reservation told this account of the root festival:

"Long ago, our people went up to the sky every feasting time. There they sang and danced and gave thanks to the Great Spirit for the roots and berries on the earth.

One time Speelyi, the red fox, and Tooptoop, his brother, went up to the sky with the people.

All sang and danced and prayed for several days. Speelyi became so tired that he dropped down and fell asleep.

Finding him and recognizing him, the people threw him down to the earth, where he belonged.

His brother Tooptoop kept on with the thanksgiving ceremony. After a while he thought of Speelyi down on the earth and went to him with some bitterroot, camas, huckleberries, and salmon. Speelyi had big feast.

When he had eaten all he can eat, Speelyi raised his hand to the east and made a new law.

"My people, no more will you go up to the sky to feast and give thanks. Many new people are coming to our land, and so we cannot do all that we are used to doing. We must share with our new friends. We must learn to bear our hardships and our sorrows as best we can.

I am going to put bitterroot and camas and other roots in different parts of the country. You will have feasts here every year. When you begin to dig the roots in the spring, you will sing and dance and give thanks to the Great Spirit. You need not travel up to the sky for that. And as you dig the roots, you will sing songs of thanksgiving. Your children will learn the songs from you."

"I am Speelyi. I have spoken."

And so that is why my people had a root festival every spring, when they begin to dig the roots we used for food.