



#FridaysOnTheFarm: Conserving the Sweetgrass Tradition

Each Friday meet farmers, producers, and landowners through our [#FridaysOnTheFarm](#) stories. Visit local farms, ranches, forests, and resource areas where USDA customers and partners *do right and feed everyone*.

This Friday, we travel to Cape Cod to meet the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe of Mashpee, Massachusetts. To the tribe, sweetgrass is more than an ordinary-looking grass with a nice aroma. It is an important ceremonial and medicinal plant.

“We burn it for purification ceremonies to cleanse us of all of our bad thoughts, so when we get ready to go into a ceremony we're clean,” said George Chuckie Green, director of natural resources for the tribe.

Conservation Technical Assistance

Sweetgrass grows best above a wetland and below an upland. In recent years, however, the tribe has been losing local access to this native Cape Cod plant. “With sea level rise moving a lot faster than people had anticipated, it's eliminated that area between the two,” said George.

The Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe teamed up with their local USDA [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) office in West Yarmouth, Massachusetts, and the agency's Plant Materials Center in Cape May, New Jersey, on a project to bring sweetgrass back by propagating it on the tribe's 39-acre farm in Mashpee.

“It was identified that sweetgrass was culturally important to the tribe and that it was diminishing throughout the Cape in areas that, for generations, the elders could go and acquire it,” said Mia Halter, district conservationist for NRCS. “But it was gone.”

Scott Snell and Chris Miller of the NRCS Plant Materials Center worked with the tribe to visit sites where these indigenous plants used to be more plentiful and collected seeds. They did some seed stratification – a process that simulates natural conditions to break dormancy and encourage germination – and plant propagation. They also held a training session for tribal members at the center.

“The Cape May Plant Materials Center is one of 25 centers nationwide,” explained Scott. “The mission of the Plant Materials Program is to serve field office staff. We do that by performing plant trials and doing plant development, developing plant releases to solve conservation problems.”



Looking to the Future

Now, the tribe is raising sweetgrass in a raised bed on the farm. “The first plants did really well. We had our first harvest last year,” said George, adding that they hope to triple the size of the area this year.

“It’s going to take some work,” added George. “It will take about five years of transplanting and spreading to get to a point where we’re really in a good position to take plants out and put them into the environment.”

“Sweetgrass is a worldwide thing,” concluded George. “It grows everywhere in the world, but nobody can really tell where it originally came from. All the genera are so close that there’s nothing that can pin it down to one spot. It’s been around for a long time.”

More Information

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Story & Credit: Diane Petit, NRCS