

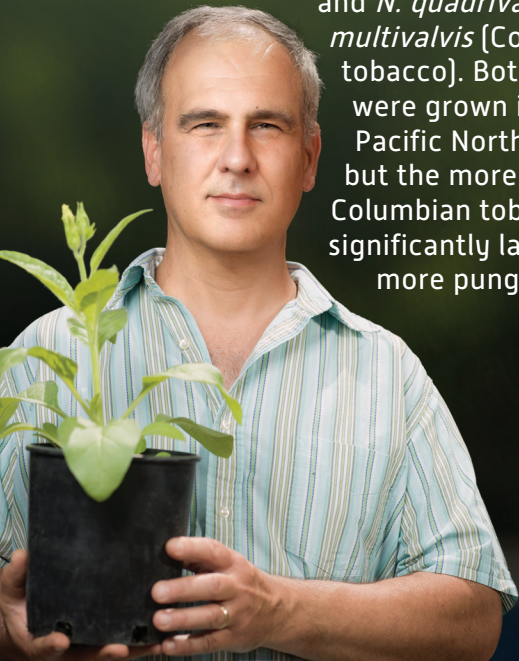
Traditional Tobacco Returns to the Land Where it is Honored

by John Schaefer, Hanis Coos

I became the water quality specialist for the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians (CTCLUSI) in 2005. As part of my orientation, I was provided an ethnobotany book which highlighted plants used by the Tribes. In this book I noticed there wasn't a photograph or drawing accompanying the description of Tribally grown tobacco. After a little research, I learned that the tobacco grown by the Tribes along the Northern Pacific coast was likely extinct. Tobacco doesn't naturally grow in our cool, damp climate and would likely disappear if not actively cultivated.

So, what was this Sacred Tobacco that our ancestors grew?

The types of tobacco of interest are varieties of *Nicotiana quadrivalvis*, specifically *N. quadrivalvis* var. *quadrivalvis* (Indian tobacco) and *N. quadrivalvis* var. *multivalvis* (Columbian tobacco). Both varieties were grown in the Pacific Northwest, but the more desirable Columbian tobacco was significantly larger and more pungent.



In 2006 I was given Indian tobacco seeds from Thomas Jefferson's Monticello in Virginia. For years, I asked many seed banks and universities if they had Columbian tobacco, but found nothing viable. I eventually settled with growing Indian tobacco as hope faded of ever finding the elusive Columbian tobacco. CTCLUSI gifted Indian tobacco seeds to the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde in 2012 and the Coquille Tribe in 2015 to help them start their own traditional tobacco programs.

In 2017 I found a reference that led to a source of Columbian tobacco in the tobacco germplasm collection in Puławy, Poland. Using connections I had made with earlier tobacco searches, I was able to have seeds sent to me from Poland. The seeds proved viable and produced beautiful plants that I had previously only seen in old drawings and crumbling herbarium specimens. The years of unsuccessful searching leads me to believe that we may be the only Tribe currently growing Columbian tobacco.

The seeds from Puławy, Poland, are direct descendants of seeds collected in 1825 from the banks of the Columbia River near present-day Portland by Scottish botanist David Douglas. Douglas, who was working for the Royal Horticultural Society in London, was caught stealing seeds and plants of Columbian tobacco from a Tribal garden plot. He was able to retain the stolen tobacco only with a payment of commercial trade tobacco (*N. tabacum*). Douglas sent the seeds and preserved plants to London where the Royal Horticultural Society distributed them to various other institutions.

After nearly 200 years and untold exchanges between seed banks, universities and botanical gardens, Sacred Columbian Tobacco finally returns to the land where it is honored.

Honoring the Sacred

Illustration by John Schaefer (Hanis Coos)



Know the difference between traditional and commercial tobacco.



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Traditional Tobacco vs. Commercial Tobacco

Tribal communities in Oregon are bringing back traditional tobacco. This sacred plant differs for every tribe – from the plant or plants referred to as "tobacco" all the way to how it is used for healing, prayer, gift offerings, ceremony and celebration.



"Tobacco is a sacred plant to our tribe and other tribes along the coast. We are bringing that tradition and awareness of the plant back to our people."

— *Mark Petrie*, Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua, & Siuslaw Indians



"Traditional tobacco teaches us patience with ourselves and with one another. It takes patience to gather, and patience to get the knowledge from our grandparents on how to use it. It's an obligation we have to always pass it on."

— *Perry Chocktoot Jr.*, Klamath Tribes



"They say that the smell, the aroma, will attract the good spirits. The spirits will want to be around where you are. We have to respect tobacco and keep it sacred."

— *Scott Kalama*, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs

Traditional tobacco was stolen from Native peoples. Colonizers turned it into a deadly commercial product. Today, the tobacco industry sells commercial tobacco back to tribal communities with harmful additives to create addiction to their products.

Tribal Nations are sovereign governments and are not directly impacted by state and local smokefree laws and other tobacco control measures. The commercial tobacco industry has identified sovereign communities as untapped and unprotected opportunities to maximize their profits. The commercial tobacco industry steals cultural imagery and misrepresents tribal nations' sacred traditions to sell their products through targeted advertising and other marketing.¹



"As Native people, we are all about mind, body, spirit, wellness and taking care of ourselves. For us, tobacco is for ceremonial purposes, not to destroy our bodies."

— *Denise Hunter*, Coquille Indian Tribe



"Cigarettes are harmful and not made for ceremonial or spiritual purposes. Traditional tobacco smoke carries our thoughts, prayers and wishes asking for protection and good health."

— *Sam GrayWolf*, Mohawk Nation [NARA community]

¹American Cancer Society, Cancer Action Network. [n.d.] Manipulating a sacred tradition: an investigation of commercial tobacco marketing & sales strategies on the Navajo Nation and other native tribes. Retrieved from http://action.fightcancer.org/site/DocServer/Industry_Influence-_Indian_Lands-_Indian_Gaming.pdf?docID=8902