



# Acoma Farm Corps

# Annual Report

2024

Prepared By :

**Aaron Lowden**





# Our Journey

The Acoma Farm Corps began in 2011 as a summer youth program, offering participants a hands-on experience in cultivating crops with traditional Acoma landrace seeds and flood irrigation farming. Over time, the program has evolved into an immersive experience through core areas, which include Acoma's ancestral agroecological approach to cultivation and land stewardship, the regeneration and rematriation of indigenous landrace seeds, and fostering community and intertribal peer relationships. Throughout the growing season, participants receive a living stipend while engaging in every stage of cultivation—from soil conservation and regeneration practices, seed-saving techniques, traditional and modern irrigation methods, to seed processing and traditional food preparation.

Our community growing efforts support continuity and resilience by providing seed access and educational resources, rooted in the regeneration of indigenous seeds uniquely adapted to the Southwest's climate, soils, aridity, and agroecological techniques. Many of these seeds, displaced over time through well-meaning conservation efforts, are now being returned to their ancestral lands, waters, and caretakers through our rematriation work. These propagated seeds are stored in our Community Seed Bank, freely available upon request to Acoma Pueblo and other Southwest tribal communities



# Our Team



## **Domonique Lowden, Acoma Farm Coordinator**

Domonique began her time with Ancestral Lands in the Summer of 2010 as a crew member with the Acoma Youth Conservation Corps and Acoma Farm Corps program. Since then she has served as a crew leader for the Adult Conservation Crews completing historic preservation projects on National Park Service sites. Currently, as the Farm Coordinator Domonique manages, mentors and trains the 2 Farm Technicians and the 5 person Farm Crew who all collaboratively steward our 2 acre field and the 30x96 ft. Senior Center Hoop House. She also co-manages and curates the our Acoma Community Seed Bank and leads the community seed requests and disbursements.

## **Zada Miller, Acoma Ancestral Lands Program Coordinator**

In 2012, Zada joined Ancestral lands as a crew member. Since then, she has held the roles of Assistant Crew Leader, Crew Leader, and Field Supervisor. Zada has served, managed, and mentored crews, all with the Ancestral lands Acoma office. Now she is the current Program Coordinator for the Acoma office since 2022 and she now manages and mentors the staff and crews in the Acoma office. In her spare time, she enjoys her time in art and being outdoors. Other activities she takes pride in are cattle ranching and other agriculture activities.

## **Aaron Lowden, Ancestral Lands Food Systems Program Manager**

In 2010, Aaron began his career working with the National Park Service Rivers and Trails Conservation Assistance Fellowship leading trail feasibility studies and youth outreach programming. Aaron later joined the Acoma Ancestral Lands Program where he recruited, managed, and mentored crews for a decade. In 2012, Aaron established the Acoma Farm Corps to teach and mentor local youth skills central to Acoma traditional agricultural food system practices and established the Acoma Ancestral Lands Seed Bank. After leaving Ancestral Lands in 2021, Aaron began working with the national non-profit Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance as the Indigenous Seed Keepers Network Program Coordinator whose mission is to nourish and resource the growing Indigenous Seed Sovereignty Movement across Turtle Island by providing grant funding, in person regional seed keeper gatherings, educational resources, mentorship training, as well as outreach and advocacy support on seed policy issues. In September this year, Aaron rejoined Ancestral Lands as the Food Systems Program Manager to continue to provide support, build capacity, create trainings and resources to the Acoma Farm Corps as well as emerging Farm Corps in Zuni and Isleta Pueblos.

# Our Vision

Our vision is to catalyze a movement to restore our local food systems through agriculture, seed sovereignty, and traditional knowledge. By fostering intergenerational community and intertribal connections between youth and elders, and empowering future generations through mentorship and immersive farmer training, we aim to protect and revitalize our seeds, ensuring the resilience of our cultural and agricultural heritage for generations to come.

## Our Mission



### **RECLAIMING OUR AGRICULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND ORIGINAL FOODS**

Rooted in one of the oldest continuously inhabited communities in North America, Acoma Pueblo's agricultural knowledge embodies centuries of sustainable stewardship. By passing down these practices through hands-on, experiential learning, we empower emerging farmers to cultivate our traditional, nutrient-dense foods. These original foods are vital not only to our heritage but also to restoring health and healing in our community, helping to address the health disparities we face today.



### **GROWING THE NEXT GENERATION OF FARMERS**

With very few farmers left, it is essential for the continuity for Acoma agricultural traditions, seed, and foodways that we have intentional mentorship opportunities.



### **SEED REGENERATION AND REMATRIATION**

Our seeds are the legacy of our ancestors. When we save seed we are preserving generations of labor, abundance, famine, selection, and saving to attain the traits they desired and needed. Color, texture, taste, resilience to the environment and climate are all pieces of our history retained in our cultivars. We propagate, regenerate, rematriate and reunite seeds that have been missing from the community through our program and Community Seed Bank.



### **STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY AND ALLIANCE BUILDING**

Kinship, community, and collaboration are at the heart of our work. Before the imposition of currency-based economies, our communities thrived through economies of care, reciprocity, and trade networks that supported our people and ensured resilience through countless challenges. The farmer mentor and peer networks built within our program enhance community spirit, foster learning, and provide vital resources that strengthen our collective well-being.

# Elk Fence Project Report

Increasing aridity has put stress on the wildlife and forced them to look for water sources like the Rio San Jose valley where our flood irrigated fields are located. This has led to a total loss of corn in 2023 and has pushed the program to construct a 10 ft. tall, 2,565 ft. fence line this past summer.

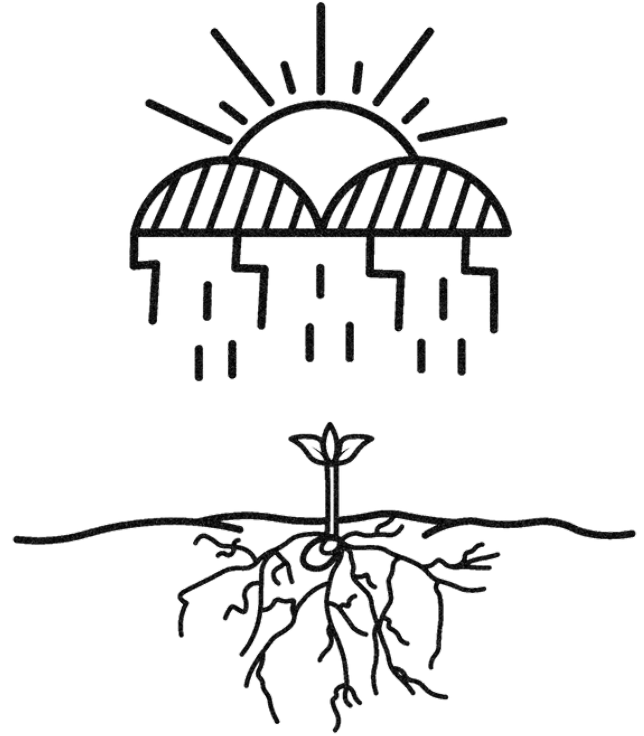
Thanks to Remy's Good Day Fund we secured the materials needed to complete the fence to protect our crops. Our crews were trained to construct the fence and completed the project in early September, which saved our crop from total loss.



# Acoma Community Seed Bank

Since formalizing the Acoma Community Seed Bank, we have fulfilled hundreds of seed requests for the past three years. Each season we grow, propagate, harvest, process, label, inventory, and store bio-regionally adapted landrace indigenous seeds. We have created a request form, distribution process, and tracking system to ensure we are fulfilling each request. To date, we have over a hundred different varieties that we continue to steward and share.

Stewarding these varieties requires so much time and space. Regenerating seeds by growing and propagating those varieties requires years of growing and planning. Letting seeds go “dead” is a common pitfall with managing seeds which is usually due to lack a capacity, improper seed storage practices, or mismanagement of regeneration grow outs. To ensure we are properly caring for these precious seeds, we have developed a 4 year strategic grow out plan and will continue our diligence ensuring the health of our seeds.



# Farmer Exchanges

In August and September, we partnered with local indigenous farms and food sovereignty organizations to share existing program models and create spaces for sharing knowledge, food, labor, seed and expanding our networks through relationship building. Farmers often express the feeling of being siloed and alone in this work. Gatherings like these boost morale, create lasting bonds, core memories, and inspire continued engagement in this work. As of today, we've visited the following farms, each with topics and learning goals:

**Flowering Tree Permaculture Institute (FTPI):** FTPI founder and Santa Clara Pueblo Permaculturalist Roxanne Swentzell facilitated a two day visit that highlighted health benefits of integrating our original foods and used her Pueblo Food Experience study as a reference for speaking to the transformative experiences of her 3 month experiment. Roxanne lead a hands on and immersive full afternoon of cooking our dinner with foods such as fried grasshoppers, elk tamales, fermented sweet tamales, and locally harvested squash and greens. There was also a introduction to permaculture through a tour of the Institute Building and Seed Bank and its functions and design towards sustainability.

**Tesuque Pueblo Seed Bank:** Emigdio Ballon and his staff provided our staff with a tour of the Tesuque Farms and Seed Bank and spoke the the importance of seed sovereignty work and gave a historical briefing on the creation of the Seed Bank. We were also trained in planting strawberry transplants and were graciously gifted extra plants for our own field.

**Three Sisters Collective Full Circle Farm:** Farm Manager Naya Valdo provided a tour of the TSC Full Circle Farm and lead the group in harvesting both Guatemalan and Hopi varieties of Amaranth. Once harvested we learned how to thresh and winnow the grain for seed. We also learned how to make Alegria, which are popped amaranth bars and talked about the health benefits and Acoma traditions and uses for amaranth.

**Dragonfly Co-Op Farm:** In our visit, Farmers Jaden Willeto and Wade Henderson spoke to their mutual aid model and their agroecological approach to growing local and culturally significant foods. We had a dialog on their dryland water harvesting strategies as well as their work on soil conservation and creating a locally sourced bio complete compost.





# Seed Rematriation

Seed Rematriation is decades long work. Access to seed conservation institutions and navigating their policies to even access the seed are challenges and often roadblocks. Most seeds are in delicate state and extremely finite supply when we bring them home. Our work is propagating, stabilizing, and dispersing to the growers and seed keepers of the community. Here are the stories behind our most recent rematriation grow outs.



**Acoma Rust Colored Corn**



**Acoma Red on White Bean**



**Acoma Red on Red Bean**

These seeds were collected from Acoma Pueblo in November 1953 by botanist Hugh C. Cutler of the Missouri Botanical Gardens. Cutler was researching races of corn of by conducting surveys in the US Southwest, Mexico and Central America by collecting and researching landraces of corn. A majority of the seeds collected by Cutler were donated to The United States Department of Agriculture's National Plant Germplasm System (NPGS) whose mission is to preserve plant genetic biodiversity, also known as germplasm. These collections are strictly only accessible to plant breeders and researchers, which indigenous community farmers do not fall under that criteria. We received these seeds second hand through a source that wishes to remain anonymous, which would have been otherwise inaccessible.

This years' grow out was conducted by the Acoma Farm Corps, Aaron Lowden, and another Acoma farmer. All three sites were successful and have generated 354 of Acoma Red on Red Beans from the original 25 seeds, 577 of Acoma Red on White Beans from 25 seeds, and 10.2 lbs of Acoma Rust Colored Corn from the original .5 lbs of seed. In 2025, these regenerated seeds will be shared with a developing collective of Acoma farmers and seed keepers through a seed co-operative. We dream of a day in the near future that we seed these seeds flowing through our community's hands and meals.



# Senior Center Hoop House

The Senior Center Hoop House, established in 2016, serves as an intergenerational growing space connecting young participants with elders. Situated at the south end of the Acoma Senior Center property, it features 24 elder-friendly raised beds equipped with drip irrigation, providing a year-round supply of fresh, locally grown leafy greens, root crops, and herbs for both elders and participants. Ancestral Lands supports this initiative by providing seeds, guidance, funding, maintenance, and labor to help our elders cultivate their garden.

This year, we continue to face challenges from unusually strong winds, requiring us to re-install the plastic covering. In the future, we are planning to fundraise for a permanent greenhouse structure that will withstand the elements.



# Our Harvest

Every season has its challenges, lessons and successes, and this year environmental variables had direct impacts on our grow out. At the beginning of the season, we saw elk herds move into the Rio San Jose Valley once again which shifted our priorities to constructing a fence that would protect our invaluable and rare seeds. Our fields were blessed with a decent monsoon season that alleviated the record heat that tested our arid adapted crops. We cultivated an estimated half an acre in our flood irrigated field and planted a cover crop in other acre in preparation for 2025 as well as planted a Winter, Summer and Fall crop in our 30x96 ft. passive solar cold frame.

With all our labor, love, care, commitment and consistency, we are happy to share that we have had one of the best harvests we've had in years. Although there was some loss mostly due to the usual ravens and local dogs, we had a great harvest of Acoma White and Blue Corn, Acoma Pumpkins and Hubbards, various local southwest bean varieties, local and central american amaranth varieties, and hundreds of pounds of fresh root veggies and leafy greens. The seed harvest has restocked our shelves in our Acoma Community Seed Bank that will go to the farmers of Acoma Pueblo and indigenous farmers of the southwest of local resilient and arid adapted varieties we have depended on for prayers and sustenance since our beginnings.

We are sincerely grateful towards our program folks Farm Coordinator Domonique Lowden, Farm Technicians Alden "Iwana" Lewis and Samuel Vallo, the Farm Corps Crew leader Nicholas Griffin, and Farm Corps Crew Kirston Martinez, Daris Estevan, Lorenzo Lowden, and Cisco Howard who have been on the ground caretaking our fields and gardens most of 2024.



**\*(s)=seed and (f)= fresh produce**

**52 lbs. (s)  
Acoma White Corn**



**26 lbs 9 oz. (s)  
Acoma Blue Corn**



**132 lbs (f)  
Acoma Mixed Pumpkin**



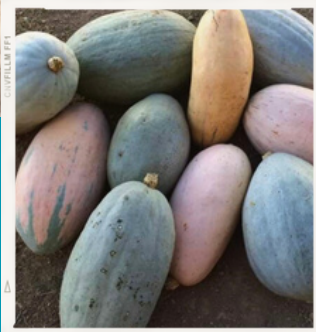
**8.4 lbs (s)  
Assorted Amaranth**



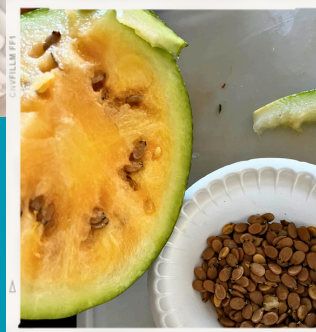
**8 lbs. (s)  
Assorted Beans**



**41 lbs. (f)  
Acoma Northside Squash**



**25 lbs. (f)  
Acoma Watermelon**



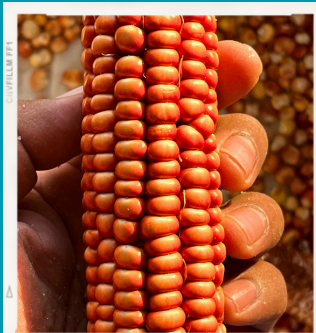
**51 lbs. (f)  
Turnips**



**416 lbs. (f)  
Beets**



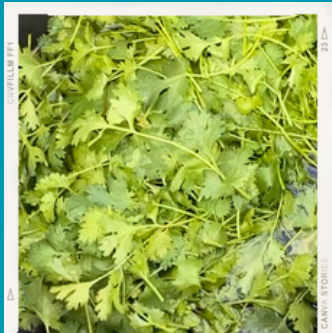
**10.2 lbs. (s)  
Acoma Rust Corn**



**7 lbs. (s)  
Tohono O'odham  
White Corn**



**4 lbs. (s)  
Acoma Cilantro**





# Da'wa'e' hau'ba', sku'wa'na'ma'

The Acoma Farm Corps envisions a thriving movement that connects youth and elders through intergenerational mentorship and immersive farmer training. Together, we are safeguarding our seeds, revitalizing our cultural and agricultural heritage, and building resilience for generations to come. This funding will enable us to expand our team in 2025, with positions including a Farm Coordinator, two Farm Technicians, and a five-member Farm Crew to advance our vital work.

## A special thank you to the incredible partners supporting our mission:

- Colorado Plateau Foundation
- W.K. Kellogg Foundation
- New Mexico Foundation
- Chamiza Foundation
- McCune Charitable Foundation
- Native American Relief Fund Zone Grant
- Schmidt Family Foundation and 11th Hour Fund
- Jon and Kathleen Altman Foundation
- Department of the Interior and Bureau of Indian Affairs
- Indian Youth Service Corps
- New Mexico Youth Conservation Corps
- Remy's Good Day Fund

**Together, we are reclaiming agricultural knowledge, fostering community, and cultivating a sustainable future.**

## What Next in 2025

- **Heirloom Fruit Tree Propagation:** We are in the initial phase of the project which is taking inventory of these trees by collecting and documenting information from the community and their memories about these varieties. Next, we will identify those trees most at risk and begin propagation by collecting cuttings in late winter and early spring, growing grafting rootstock, collecting viable seeds from stone fruit, and eventually transplanting the trees into a community orchard project and dispersing some to community farmers. We will also host a community workshop to share the skills we are developing in our Acoma collective of growers and seed keepers.
- **Naa'baa'ma' Revitalization:** Our ancestral dryland farming and water management strategies known as naa'baa'ma', or "where the water flows/falls", as most know as ephemeral alluvial dryland farming, optimize every drop of water from precipitation. Our future is dependent on our arid adapted seeds and the ancient solutions of our ancestors, especially as we endure climate chaos. Unfortunately, previous generations assimilated into western knowledge and paradigms were brainwashed into believing these solutions as obsolete and archaic. Much of the knowledge, infrastructure, and seeds are at a tipping point as we lose the few elders who stewarded the Acoma Valley alluvium where we practiced naa'baa'ma', which has been misunderstood and mismanaged for decades and is in need of restoration. This year, we plan on training and implementing Ancestral Lands crews to begin a restoration project in the Acoma Valley alluvium, where we will practice ancestral strategies for maintaining and charging the alluvium while also mitigating erosion.

# Contact Us

**For questions or inquiries for Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps or it's offices in Zuni, Hopi, Acoma, Isleta, Albuquerque, or Gallup, please reach out to:**

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