

## The Navajo Peach Orchard Resurgence



For centuries, the Navajo people of the Four Corners region — where Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado meet — cultivated peach orchards as part of their agricultural and cultural life. Peach trees were introduced to the Canyon de Chelly area in the 1700s from the Hopi, who had adopted them earlier. By the mid 1800s, vast orchards dotted the desert landscape, producing fruit for the local diet, trade, and ceremonies. Peaches were more than food — they were a trade good, a ceremonial purgative, and even used in traditional crafts like polishing stone griddles. Their vibrant colors — yellow, pink, orange, amber, rose, and coral — were said to reflect the hues of the canyon walls, making them a symbol of the land itself.



In 1863, during the U.S. government's forced removal of the Navajo (the "Long Walk" - 200 miles), orchards were targeted. Livestock were slaughtered, crops burned, and thousands of peach trees cut down, with some reports citing over 3,000 destroyed in a single day. This devastation nearly erased centuries of cultivation, including the destruction of Navajo history. But something happened...

Modern Revival - Today, Navajo horticulturist Reagan Wytsalucy is working to restore traditional peaches. Her research blends scientific horticulture with traditional knowledge, aiming to reintroduce heritage varieties to Canyon de Chelly and other Navajo areas. She documents stories from elders, studies natural growth practices, and collaborates with the National Park Service to preserve cultural and ecological heritage. While modern varieties dominate, some Navajo orchards still use traditional methods: planting from seed, protecting trees from pests, and growing in alluvial terraces that collect runoff from cliffs. Volunteers and community members continue to plant and care for these trees, keeping the orchard tradition alive. In short: Navajo peach orchards are a living link to a rich agricultural and cultural past. Through Wytsalucy's work, they are being restored not just as a food source, but as a cultural and ecological legacy.