

Sylvia Watchman helped her family tend to peach trees when she was a child. Now, she's helping to reintroduce the trees to the Navajo Nation's Canyon de Chelly via the Peach Tree Project.



THE FRUITS OF HER LABOR

When Sylvia Watchman was a child, she helped her family tend to the peach trees they planted in Canyon de Chelly. “Sometimes we’d sit in the sun and eat the peaches,” she says. “Sometimes they were a snack. Sometimes they were a whole meal.” Today, with support from the Peach Tree Project, Watchman and other Navajos are working to restore this heritage crop to the canyon. But drought, expense and invasive species are making things difficult.

BY KELLY VAUGHN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIEN McROBERTS

SYLVIA WATCHMAN’S JEEP BOUNCES LIKE A BUG THROUGH CANYON DE CHELLY, the nail-polish-red Rubicon plowing through sand and between sandstone walls, its tires chewing through the terrain like teeth.

It’s early September, and the peaches are ripening. So, we go to find them in tiny groves, to explore a new generation of ancient fruit thriving in an unexpected place. “When I was growing up,” Watchman says, “we would play in the ruins, even though we weren’t supposed to. We always found peach pits, and my grandmother would say that they had been there for ages.”

Agriculture — though not specifically peach cultivation — has long been dominant in the canyon, beginning with the Basketmakers and Ancestral Puebloans, who grew fields of corn and squash. The Hopis nurtured them, too. The Navajos nurture them still. And when Watchman was a child, she helped her family tend to the peach trees they planted.

“We would talk to Mother Earth and Father Sky and bless the peach seeds with corn pollen,” she says. “Sometimes we’d sit in the sun and eat the peaches. Sometimes they were a snack. Sometimes they were a whole meal.”



ABOVE: Watchman and Ron Garnanez break up clods of dirt as they prepare to plant a young peach tree at the bottom of the canyon.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Because of lower rainfall, peaches grown in Canyon de Chelly are likely to be smaller than those grown in wetter locations.

people, she patiently answers questions about peaches and the logistics of growing them in the canyon's sandy earth, asking for input from Ron Garnanez and Eileen Brazier — a Navajo-Churro shepherd and weaver from Shiprock, New Mexico, and an independent curator and fine art dealer from Santa Fe, respectively. They're helping to reintroduce peaches to the canyon via the Peach Tree Project, which began in 2018. Its mission is to raise funds for the planting, nurturing and maintenance of the trees in the canyon.

"Peaches are a sacred food," Garnanez says. "They give peach tree nourishment to old bones." So much so that he's going to grow some at his farm in Shiprock, then transport them to the canyon later this year. "They need to be cultivated," he adds. "[In 2020], we'll have strong trees. We're growing the real thing. Our ancestors lived with these trees, talked to them."

Watchman nods. Tears build in her eyes the way water does behind a dam.

"Everything has feeling," she reminds us. "Everything communicates with everything, in the dark world and in the light world. My aunt would communicate with the trees. She always said that you had to talk to them. And the elders would do

The night before we venture into Canyon de Chelly, Watchman sits in a hotel restaurant just outside the national monument, which was designated in April 1931. Dressed in a T-shirt and wearing the traditional silver and turquoise jewelry of her

that. It's possible for someone to pick up the tradition."

Together, Garnanez and Watchman explain what it means to restore a heritage crop to the canyon. And what that symbolizes in terms of endurance, resiliency and hope for the Navajo people.

THE KUNLUN MOUNTAINS ARE ONE OF THE LONGEST mountain ranges in China, stretching for more than 1,900 miles and creating the northern edge of the Tibetan Plateau. According to legend, Emperor Wu of Han sent a legion of men to find the source of the Yellow River, and the men gave the name "Kunlun" to the mountains they found there. There's no direct translation of the word, but some stories report that gods and goddesses live in the range. Others tell of mythical creatures and plants.

But fact tells us that this region was where peaches were first cultivated, and experts have unearthed fossil records of peaches in Kunming, China, that are an estimated 2.6 million years old.

How, then, did they make their way to Canyon de Chelly, more than 7,500 miles away? It's most likely that people, through natural migration, moved the peaches across Asia and the Middle East (they once were believed to have originated in Persia, thus their scientific name, *Prunus persica*), then on to Europe.

The fruit came to the New World by way of Spanish explorers, and by 1600, peaches were documented in Mexico. By the early 1700s, they'd made their way to the desert Southwest and Canyon de Chelly. And they flourished: cradled by deep, sandy soil; warmed by summer sun; and chilled by winter winds.



The clingstone peaches became so valuable, the Navajos used them as barter, earning livestock, other produce and crafts in trade.

But then the armies came.

First, in retaliation for Navajo raids on Spanish settlements, Lieutenant Antonio Narbona and his men marched into the canyon in 1805, killing 115 Navajos and capturing about 30 more in Canyon del Muerto, the northern branch of the gorge. The Narbona Panel, a pictograph drawn in striking detail on one of the canyon’s sandstone walls, depicts the massacre. But still, the peaches endured. In fact, by 1853, Henry Linn Dodge, who served as a liaison to the Navajos, had documented “abundant peaches of a superior quality.”

A decade later, Kit Carson received his orders from General James H. Carleton.

“Henceforth, every Navajo male is to be killed or taken prisoner on sight,” the orders read. “Say to them, ‘Go to the Bosque Redondo, or we will pursue and destroy you. We will not make peace on any other terms. ... This war shall be pursued until you cease to exist or move. There can be no other talk on the subject.’”

In his 1976 work, *The Book of the Navajo*, historian Raymond Friday Locke described the assault.

“As [Albert W.] Pheiffer started westward down the canyon, Carson sent a detachment of 50 men to scout the mouth of the canyon system,” he wrote. “There, the troops fought a short skirmish with some Navajos, killed 11 and captured two

women and two children and about 130 sheep and goats. ... Pheiffer continued to lead his troops down the floor of Canyon del Muerto toward the main branch of the canyon, where the snow lay 2 feet deep. Once again Navajos appeared on the heights of the canyon walls to hurl stones, pieces of wood and curses down on the Americans. But these half-starved protesters were not the proud warriors of yesteryear. The Americans ignored them, but did kill three men who came within range of their muskets. Pheiffer rode on down the canyon, burning hogans and food caches and killing all livestock he found.”

The Navajos were exhausted and hungry. They were cold. But the Army showed no mercy. Carson, whose nickname was “The Rope Thrower,” told a group of Navajos seeking to surrender to return to their people and tell them they had 10 days to appear at Fort Canby, New Mexico.

Later that day, the Army ravaged the crops at the mouth of the canyon. “It took me and 300 men most of the day to destroy a field of corn,” Carson reported. Shortly thereafter, he left for Fort Canby in an effort to beat the Navajos there. But before he departed, he ordered the pillaging of all Navajo property within the canyon, including the nearly 5,000 peach trees that grew there.

“By the time Pheiffer and Captain Asa B. Carey were finished with this task and were ready to leave for Fort Canby on the morning of January 17, another 200 Navajos had

BELOW: Watchman's granddaughter Kayah climbs a tree to retrieve some peaches.
OPPOSITE PAGE: Watchman holds heirloom peach pits, the basis of the planting project.

surrendered, 23 had been killed, 34 had been taken prisoner — and the spirit of the Diné had been broken,” Locke wrote. “As news of what the Americans had done at Canyon de Chelly spread through the hidden camps, the Navajos realized they had already lost the land they’d fought to keep.”

There were holdouts — of both people and peaches — hidden away in narrow passages and secret side canyons, where the soldiers couldn’t decimate them. But by mid-February 1864, there were 1,200 Navajo people at Fort Canby, and come March, the Long Walk to Bosque Redondo had begun. In 1868, after four years of exile, the government allowed the Navajos to return home.

“WHEN I’M AWAY FROM THE CANYON, I FEEL lonely,” Watchman says as she steers the Jeep toward her home on the canyon’s floor. “When I come back, I’m happy. The canyon

always feels really good to me.”

Several years ago, she took a trip to San Francisco with some friends. Despite the change of scenery, she’d left her heart somewhere else.

“All during that time, my mind was on the canyon,” Watchman says. “I felt out of place, like I needed to come home. It was like leaving a child behind.”

And so, she tends her peach trees like children. They cluster in a grove on her property, flanked by the canyon’s walls and guarded by a scarecrow with an orange face and a black hat. Sometimes, Watchman waters the trees with a white enamel coffee pot that belonged to her aunt, who died last year. It’s a subtle tribute to the past and a hope for the future.

“I hope that if we get more trees, people will be inspired to fix fences,” Watchman says. “Even small rocks can make a big cliff.”

There are a number of obstacles to growing peaches in Canyon de Chelly, drought and lack of easy access to water chief among them. Young trees are expensive, too, and transporting them can be challenging. And then there’s the matter of birds stealing the fruit, the specter of a fruit-hungry black bear, and invasive Russian olive trees choking out other vegetation and stealing what little water exists underground.

And so, Wilson Hunter wears the slow smile of a man who’s doing everything he can with very few resources. As a management assistant at Canyon de Chelly National Monument, he works with the canyon’s community and participates in some of the projects there, including one with the Student Conservation Association, which for several years sent a work crew to the canyon during the summer. The SCA cleared that invasive vegetation, repaired hogans, replaced boards on bridges and helped with other needs.

Funding issues canceled the SCA program in 2019, but it’s coming back this year, Hunter says. He hopes to find another organization to help with the Peach Tree Project, but in a broader sense, he hopes Navajo students will be inspired to return to the canyon to give back.

“I grew up in the canyon,” Hunter says. “If we needed water, we could dig our hands into the earth on the edge of the wash: water. That’s not the case anymore. Getting the interest of young people to become caretakers is so important. It will



bring life back to the canyon. There has to be some stewardship here.”

As it relates to the peach trees, much of that stewardship, unfortunately, must be financial. Trucking in water to nourish the peach trees and other crops is expensive, but it’s necessary: Chinle, the town adjacent to Canyon de Chelly, receives an average of only 9.58 inches of rain each year. Peach trees generally require 36 inches to thrive; as a result, Canyon de Chelly peaches may be smaller than mature fruit grown elsewhere.

But they’re beautiful.

On this September day, Watchman picks a bushel. It’s as though the fruit has absorbed the colors of the canyon walls. Yellow. Pink. Orange. Amber. Rose. Coral. They’re the colors of a sunset over Spider Rock. The colors of the sand from which the peaches grew.

“My grandfather was a chief,” Watchman says. “He begged a soldier to let him go back. He missed these walls so much.”

There is heartbreak in these peaches. Healing, too.


We each take a bite from the fruit Watchman has handed us. It isn’t quite ripe, but it’s not underripe, either.

The peaches are little mysteries.

The skin snaps. An initial burst of sour melts into sweet. Braziel tastes it, too.

“Oh, I see what you mean,” she says. “These are different. Delicious.”

She’s responsible for many of the new trees, having helped to facilitate a partnership with the International Land Sensitive Art Foundation, which continues to fund the project. She also encourages visitors to curated exhibitions — and from around the world, via her website — to donate \$200, the cost to purchase, plant and maintain a tree in the canyon.

And for Watchman and Garnanez and the countless other Navajos attempting to reclaim this part of their cultural and spiritual heritage, it matters. Take it from Watchman: “All of these trees are the grandmas now.” 

• For more information about the Peach Tree Project, visit eileenbrazielart.com/peach-tree-project.

