

AGRICULTURE: Compatible with Subsistence Lifestyle

By TONY SCHUERCH

Eskimos are traditionally hunters and fishermen, not farmers. But when miners and others arrived in the arctic near the turn of the century and planted seeds they brought, our people were immediately interested. In a short time, nearly every Eskimo family in some villages had a small garden plot.

Over the years, life became less harsh, and it was easier to buy canned vegetables in stores. Also, tundra soil is low in nutrients, and continued gardening in the same plot produced smaller harvests each year. Eventually, it was no longer worth the trouble to put in a garden. Gardening was no longer a necessity.

In the summer of 1976, when my family returned home from attending school in the lower 48, there only were a half dozen families raising gardens in the region. My family wanted to teach others to garden using modern methods. Pat Ivy of the Cooperative Extension Service in Fairbanks heard of our interest and put us in touch with Col. M.R. "Muktuk" Marston, founder of the Eskimo Scout Battalions.

When "Muktuk" heard our plans, he offered to help us buy the equipment and supplies to get started, and we quickly accepted. We wrote to several villages, offering to help them do an experiment in raising gardens. Art Douglas, of Ambler, responded.

In the spring of 1977, we took an airplane load of supplies and equipment to the quiet little village of Ambler, in the upper Kobuk River. We really didn't have much idea of how to get started, since we knew virtually nothing of arctic gardening.

However, our misgivings didn't last long. The people of ambler invited us to try out the new tiller in their yards, and soon everybody was either watching the machine work or operating it themselves.

The people had never seen chemical fertilizer before, either. In the cold arctic soils, composting natural vegetation can take three years or longer. Chemical ferti-

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lizer, however, is effective immediately.

There were 25 highly productive gardens in Ambler that summer. We began to hear ambitious plans for expanding family gardens. By the summer of 1978, we felt confident enough to expand the project to three more villages.

Again "Muktuk" offered to fund us. We had hoped there would be as many as seventy gardens, but news spread from Ambler, and we received requests from ten villages, and over 200 families.

Scrambling desperately to meet the need, we contacted Brigham Young University for help. They responded with 12,000 feet of wire fencing, more seed, and two tillers, all of which arrived just before planting season. "Muktuk" sent another \$4,000 for more materials. That season, we counted over 250 gardens, nearly all of which were highly productive, and growing an increasingly wide variety of vegetables. All of the gardens were located north of the arctic circle.

By the spring of 1979, we had received requests for help with

gardening from nearly all the villages of the Bering Straits region and also from the Bristol Bay Native Association (BBNA) in Dillingham.

By this time, the work for administering the project had grown to a full-time job for six months of the year.

We accepted the offer of the State Division of Economic Enterprise to contract to pay for some of the time required. The Marston Foundation and Brigham Young University continued to provide necessary equipment and supplies.

However, it was the people

themselves who made the project succeed. Using their land and labor, they worked and experimented, and learned in an activity previously unknown.

They cleared land, broke the ground, fenced it, planted and nurtured their gardens.

As a result, last summer there were 550 gardens in 25 villages in western Alaska, which produced many thousand of dollars worth of fresh vegetables.

The greatest single need of our people now, and which the project is unable to provide, is education in agriculture.

The Cooperative Extension

Service has the track record, but not the funding, to adequately serve this need at this time. We await news of whether of legislature will prove funds for the Extension Service to carry out this important task. If we may add agricultural skills to subsistence food gathering, we could be a well-fed, self-reliant people in our own land.

This year, the project is prepared to serve 40 villages, and we hope and expect 1,000 family gardens in western Alaska. It appears that "subsistence farming" is here to stay.

(Editor's Note — Villages or individuals interested in the project may contact the author at Box 606, Kotzebue, Alaska 99752, phone 442-3272.)