

# Handout for Tobacco Workshop

## March 2025

Tobacco has been one of the most impactful plants domesticated by Native Americans. For thousands of years native cultures were well aware of the powerful nature of this plant and evolved practices to incorporate it into their ceremonial life. Removing the tobacco plant from this cultural context has created a problem out of control and resulted in millions of deaths. It is very important to keep this in mind and treat Tobacco in all its aspects with great respect.

### Part I – Cultural Context

 **Species of Tobacco.** *Nicotiana tabacum* (the most widely cultivated commercial tobacco) is not the only species of tobacco used in the Americas. *Nicotiana rustica*, sometimes called “wild tobacco” is also used by many cultures and some people believe that it’s the “true tobacco.” *Nicotiana glauca* also known as “tree tobacco” originated in South America and is now widespread. It’s often used interchangeably with other tobaccos. *Nicotiana attenuata*, also called “coyote tobacco” is native to the western US and was used by cultures in that area as a ceremonial medicine. Although there are other species of tobacco, these are the most significant in terms of human use.

 **Archaic Tobacco Use.** The use of tobacco as a medicine far predates the beginnings of agriculture. Wild and semi-wild uncultivated plots of local tobacco species provided adequate amounts of tobacco for some ceremonial and medicinal use.

 **Agriculture and the Beginning of Tobacco Culture.** The advent of farming forever changed the relationship between people and plants. This change can be observed in the archaeological record by studying the evolution of smoking pipes. Smoking pipes have long been emblematic of Native American cultures. Smoking paraphernalia increased in complexity and significance over a broad area. Large areas

of soil suitable for tobacco were used for agricultural purposes, and storage for tobacco and food crops were created. The success of this system eventually created a surplus that further altered social norms associated with the plant.

### Traditional Native uses of Tobacco.

Tobacco is one of the most widespread Native American sacraments and is used by cultures from the Arctic Circle to the Equator. There are many ways tobacco was incorporated in ceremonial life. Five of the main uses are the Pipe Ceremony, non-smoking dry offerings, smudging or fumigating, gifting to an elder or important person, and as an offering left in thanks for harvesting other plant medicines.

### Jamestown and the European Approach to Tobacco.

Jamestown was the first English colony in North America and is an excellent example of the European approach to tobacco. King James was morally opposed to the “vice” of smoking and decreed the death penalty for any of his subjects caught smoking tobacco. When it became apparent that the Jamestown colony would fail without tobacco as a cash export crop he not only made the plant legal but demanded casks of tobacco in exchange for supplying “brides” to the colonists. The colony also imported the first enslaved Africans to North America to do the hard labor of clearing and farming the tobacco fields.

### Colonialism, Slavery and Genocide.

The eventual success of the English colonies in North America made huge fortunes for large land-owners and the Crown. This resulted in a rush to bring new land into production. The land they claimed, cleared and farmed belonged to aboriginal nations with long, well understood claims and it was often taken by force or deceit. Turning Tobacco into a commodity and using business models based on slavery had terrible consequences for people and the land. By the 1830’s the original owners of the southern tobacco growing belt had been forcibly “removed” across the Mississippi River.

### Taxes, Allotments and Sharecropping.

Today the governments of the U.S. and the Indian Nations both benefit from tax revenue on tobacco. The U.S. government controls commercial tobacco production through an allotment of acreage system. Sharecropping was another form of control through indebtedness and dispossession. There is little incentive to change the status quo.

### Improving the Product and Selling Death.

Nicotine, the psychoactive ingredient in tobacco, is habit forming. Manipulating the chemistry of the leaf exaggerates this effect and creates an endless demand for the “product”. The disastrous health effects of this adulteration and the advertising and promotion of casual tobacco use have created a monumental health crisis.

### Capitalism and Control - No Room for the Sacred.

The European approach to tobacco was to treat it as a commodity. The addictive nature of the nicotine in tobacco was exploited to create a market and the supply was tightly controlled by whatever government had the authority to tax the “product”. Health risks and the social impact of slavery and sharecropping were ignored or minimized by the big tobacco companies and U.S. government.

## Part II - Growing Tobacco

### Find a Place for Your Garden.

Much of the work and planning will depend on the size and location of your garden. The size should be appropriate for your needs. The soil should be sandy or loose and fertile. Plants should be away from human and vehicle traffic and secure from animals including dogs. In the MCN plants often benefit from partial shade and a windbreak.

### Start the Seeds.

Tobacco seeds are tiny and should be thinly surface sown in communal pots or flats. Covering the seed to raise the humidity is beneficial, but care is needed to avoid damping off of germinating seedlings. In outdoor ground beds seed may be sown on lightly raked soil and watered in. Fire is sometimes used to prepare outdoor beds and control weeds and fungus. The ash from seed bed fires also raises the PH, which is good in acid soils.

### Prepare the Garden.

Tobacco does not require deeply plowed soil, but turning the garden with a shovel or light disking is ideal. A rototiller is also a good choice for this job.

### Prepare Seedlings, Pots and Nursery Area.

Most small tobacco gardens are more successful if the seedlings are transplanted into 4" pots. These can be recycled cans, pots or other containers. Obtain enough pots and soil and prepare an area to grow seedlings to transplant size.

### Transfer Seedlings into 4" pots.

Starting at one edge of the flat or pot, scoop out small bites of the matted seedlings and pick apart the individual plants. Plant them deeply in loose, sterile potting soil making sure the crown of the plant is above the soil level. Water the plants immediately after repotting.

### Transplant Day.

It is important to pick a good day for transplanting the 4" pots into the garden. Do not put the tender seedlings out in high wind, before a storm, or in blazing sun directly from an indoor or shady nursery. Warm cloudy or partly cloudy days with light wind are best. Be sure and water in the transplants.

### Fertilizer, Cultivation and Pests.

Tobacco is a heavy feeder and needs nitrogen rich soil for its growth. The plant is tolerant of a surprisingly wide range of conditions, but the effects of fertilizing are very obvious. Young plants often need cultivating in the garden, and a good quality long handled hoe is highly recommended. Plants nearing maturity will starve and shade out nearby competition with their broad leaves. Growing plants should be monitored frequently for pests, with special attention paid to hornworms.

### Dangers to Your Tobacco Crop.

Many environmental factors will affect your garden. Some can be controlled, some can be mitigated, and others are beyond human control. Every year is different from the year before in some way, even as many of the greatest challenges remain the same. Here in the MCN some of the dangers to your crop can include damage from high winds, drought and extreme heat. Mammals, such as deer, armadillos, moles, gophers, and rabbits will devour or destroy your plants. Humans, another common mammal, can be the worst. Tobacco plants can be run over, mowed down or contaminated by spray from herbicide application. Insects including grasshoppers and others are always a worry.

## Harvesting Homegrown Tobacco.

Commercial tobacco and ceremonial or homegrown tobacco are harvested and processed differently from each other. Little human labor is required for commercial tobacco, machines do the work. No machines are necessary to harvest and save ceremonial or home grown tobacco. Humans do the work and interact with the tobacco plants.

## Drying, Curing and Storing Your Harvest.

Tobacco can be harvested leaf by leaf or entire plants or plant sections can be cut. All tobacco should be hung to dry, but a well ventilated drying rack may be adequate for a container plant or micro-garden. I add nothing to “cure” the drying leaf. When the leaf veins are dry enough to snap the leaf is ready to store. The final processing should occur on a day with humidity in the 60% range so the leaf wont crumble. Store in an airtight container.

## Airtight Storage Containers.

Light, heat and oxygen are the enemies of any dry stored plant material. A light proof, air tight container will store tobacco in excellent condition for at least two decades in my experience. Metal containers such as cookie tins are mouse proof as well and make great tobacco tins.