The desert contains a feast of native foods

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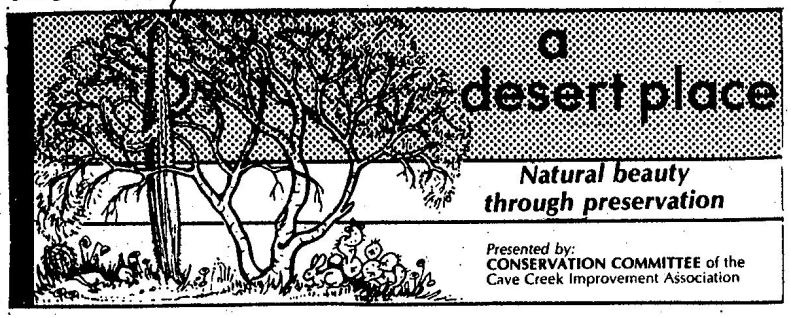

We are thankful for our lush desert in the Foothills teaming with a great variety of wildlife.

We are grateful for all the beauty it brings into our lives, and at the same time are glad that we live in the day of supermarkets and convenience stores to satisfy every whim.

Can you journey back in your imagination several hundred years to a time when our bountiful desert was the supermarket of the Indians? Where would you begin to prepare a feast for some family or tribal festive occasion?

First of all, if the occasion has any ritual aspects to it, you would probably begin by bathing in the soapy water obtained through the use of yucca roots. The roots are mashed to a pulp and swirled through the water. They contain the compound saponin, which has detergent properties. Some Navajos still use the suds to wash the wool used in rug weaving. It is considered superior to commercial products as it will loosen and remove dirt in wool without taking away the natural lanolin which is important to the preservation of the animal fibers.

The next task of the cooks of the family would be to select the main entree. You might choose a venison roast or baked rabbit or quail, depending on the skill of the hunter and the taste of the guests. While Indian festive meals probably did not have the same assortment of courses as we plan for our Thanksgiving dinners, quite a variety was possible.

If the feast took place in the spring, you might begin the meal with delectable yucca flowers as an appetizer. They could be served with ocotillo flower punch or dandelion wine. A salad course could consist of the fresh, young pads of prickly pear (spines removed), leaves of monkey flowers and miners' lettuce. There could be a choice of salad or wild onion soup. Vegetables available at the proper times of year would include squash and corn.

Bread was a staple of early Indian diet; made commonly from mesquite beans, but also from sunflower seeds, cattails, etc. One might plan to top the bread with jelly or jam made from the fruit of the saguaro, prickly pear or from the hackberries.

Our festival meal might be topped off with saguaro pudding, along with some barrel cactus candy and roasted, mixed nuts — such as jojoba beans and sunflower seeds. A concluding drink could be brewed Mormon tea or jojoba coffee.

The gathering of plants, seeds and berries was time-consuming, and an arduous task followed by laborious and tedious, but skillful, preparation of food. Much time had to be spend pounding mesquite beans and other wild seeds into flour.

A wonderful learning experience for our children would be to gather and prepare one of these foods for the experience and satisfaction of trying to "live off the land."

A word of caution: It is imperative that we are capable of identifying plants accurately, or have someone along on gathering trips knowledgeable in plant identification. Also, authentic or proven recipes and instructions should be followed precisely.

At our Desert Foothills Library you will find **The Cactus Cookbook** and **The Cuisine of the American Southwest** — both of which will provide you with interesting recipes.

A simple and safe experiment could be to gather and grind enough mesquite beans to make a cup of flour and substitute it for a cup of wheat flour in any bread recipe. Boil one cup of Mormon tea twigs in eight cups of water for five minutes. Set it aside for 15 minutes and drink it with the bread.

Have a happy and unique desert Thanksgiving!