

TO FARM OR NOT TO FARM: THAT IS THE QUESTION

Not all hunting and gathering people in Arizona wanted to raise crops, even if they had good farmland and enough water in their territories. There were several reasons for this. First, there were disadvantages to staying in one place for too long. For example, firewood might be used up too quickly. If this happens, people would have to walk very far to find wood and carry it back to camp. Other important resources might become hard to get, as well.

Second, garden crops might not have enough time to get ripe. Plants like corn and squash don't do well with droughts, floods, freezes, and diseases. It takes a lot of time and energy to raise crops. You have to prepare the soil, plant seeds, weed, and water. You have to keep hungry animals from eating your food. The failure to harvest a good and needed crop would be very upsetting. Not getting enough food from the crops might be risky for the community food supply. People would have to consider if the same amount of work collecting wild plants would have provided more food.

Third, if many plants did survive until the fruit and vegetables were ripe, then the food must be prepared, stored, and protected for future use. This required lots of work. In addition, after food has been stored for the future, people might have had to guard it to keep it safe from animals and other people.

Fourth, there were advantages to a nomadic way of life. Families and friends were always looking for new or better places to hunt and gather. If they were tied to one place, they might miss out on getting what they needed. Also, hunter-gatherer families would miss the annual gathering of their far-away family and friends that happened nearly every autumn. This gathering took place in resource-rich places when lots of food was on



hand. Many groups came together for a short time to visit and share food and stories with each other.

There were other reasons as well why people might not choose to be farmers. Can you add more reasons to this list?

There were good reasons to add cultivated plants to a diet. First, new, tasty, and healthy foods were always welcome. Domesticated plants, like corn, provided the slow burning sugars that give you energy. People need these to work hard and to satisfy their hunger.

Second, some crops, like corn and beans, were easy to dry and store. Dried grains and seeds could be used when fresh foods were unavailable. It was especially hard to get fresh food in the winter.

Third, the potential benefit from planting one or a few dried corn kernels (seeds) in a single hill or row could be very great. One seed can grow into a plant that would produce hundreds of seeds on each ear of corn. In addition, the corn cob and the husks could be used for other purposes. It can even be burned like wood in a fire. Very little of the corn plant was wasted. In a good year, farming could result in a large harvest. This would make it possible to feed many people for several months. It would provide security against hunger or starvation.

Fourth, with lots of stored food, larger groups of people could live together for longer periods of time. As a result, group members could help one another with their daily tasks. Daily tasks would include gathering firewood and water, collecting plants, hunting, and religious or social events. There would be more people to protect the group if they came under attack. As they say, "Safety in numbers."

There were other reasons why people might choose to become a farmer. Can you add more reasons to this list?