



- ① Egg sized Ozark Wild Gourd
- ② Close-up of sumpweed seedhead
- ③ Goosefoot leaf
- ④ The little barley that grows along roadways and driveways
- ⑤ Seed husk of erect knotweed and of the prostrate knotweed that grows in the cracks of sidewalks
- ⑥ Wild sunflower

## The Tall Grass Prairie Peninsula: A Cradle of Agriculture

Of the four major cradles of agriculture in the world, the one that provides the clearest record of how plant domestication changed both the plants and the lifestyle of the people is the tall grass prairie peninsula.

That is something of an irony since the cradles of agriculture that tend to get the most emphasis in the textbooks and documentaries are the Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia and the flood plains of Egypt.

We might be more appreciative of the development of agriculture on the tall grass prairie if it had revolved around the kinds of plants that are most familiar today and that are big cash crops such as corn and beans.

But that is not the case. The plants that were first cultivated were in many cases the same plants or related to the same plants we regard as bothersome weeds today: the same little barley that grows up along the edges of roads and driveways, a knotweed that is closely related to the knotweed that grows up in the cracks of sidewalks, and a goosefoot virtually identical to the garden pest, lamb's quarter.

Perhaps the earliest cultivated plants were an Ozark Wild Gourd that still grows in profusion in the Ozarks, the sumpweed that is

abundant in the southern part of the tall grass prairie, and the wild sunflower that is often seen growing along the Interstates.

A seventh plant cultivated thousands of years ago is the may grass that does not grow naturally north of about Cape Girardeau.

But what about corn or maize, that quintessential crop we associate with the American Indians of history? When does it enter the picture?

It turns out that corn was not cultivated in what is now the prairie peninsula until about 1,200 years ago. That is thousands of years later than the cultivation of other plants which began about 5,000 years ago if not thousands of years earlier. It was well underway across much of the tall grass prairie peninsula and neighboring parts of Tennessee, Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Ohio, Missouri and Alabama by 4,000 years ago.

For more information, see "A Quiet Revolution: Origins of Agriculture in Eastern North America" by Ruth Selig in the Smithsonian's *National Museum of Natural History Bulletin for Teachers* (Vol. 15, No. 2, 1993). The paper has also been posted on the web and is easy to find with search engines.