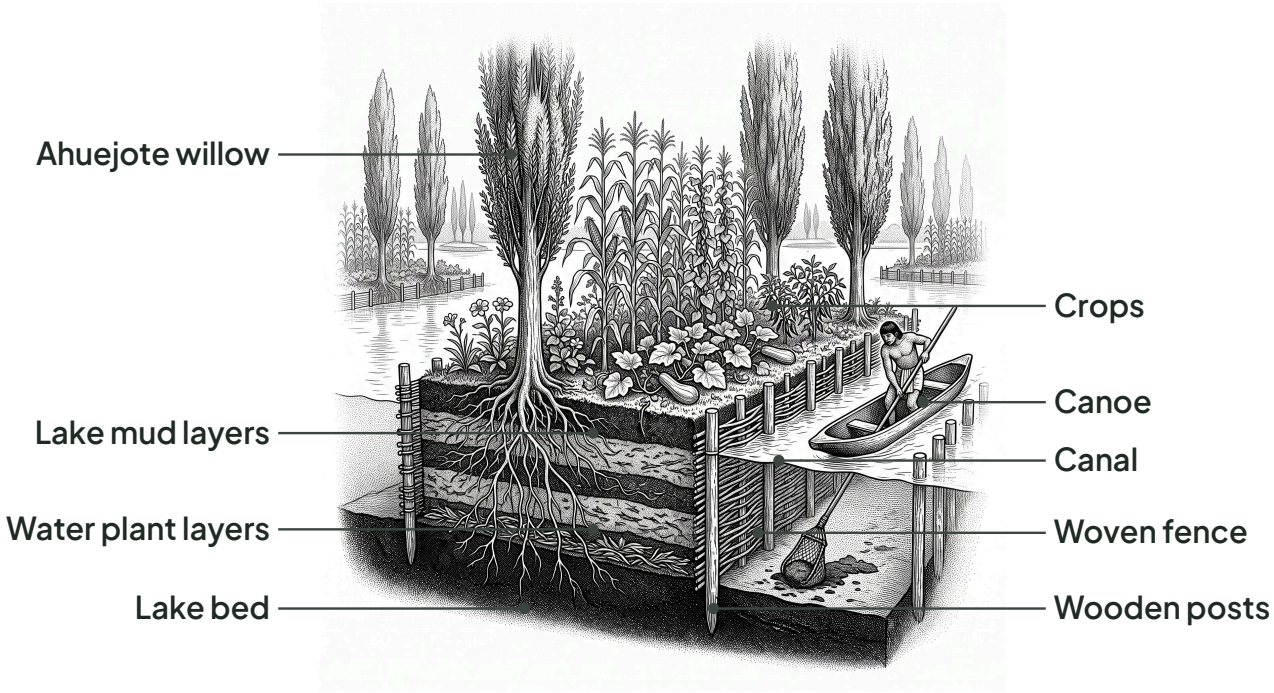
HOW A CHINAMPA WORKED

A chinampa was a long, narrow field built up from the bed of a shallow, fresh lake. People call chinampas “floating gardens,” but they did not float. Farmers in the Valley of Mexico built them with posts, woven fences, lake mud and water plants, and willow roots held them firm. Canals on every side carried canoes and kept the soil wet, so chinampas gave several harvests a year.



◆ THE PARTS ◆

Wooden posts Stakes driven deep into the lake bed along the sides. They marked out the field and held the fence in place.

Woven fence Reeds or branches woven between the posts like a basket. It held the mud and plants in place so the sides did not wash away.

Lake mud layers Rich, wet mud scooped from the lake bottom and piled inside the fence. It made fertile soil, and farmers added fresh mud each year.

Water plant layers Mats of water plants and reeds piled between the layers of mud. As they rotted, they fed the soil and helped build the field up above the water.

Ahuejote willow A tall, narrow willow planted along the edge. Its roots grew down through the layers and held the chinampa firm, and its thin shape cast little shade on the crops.

Crops Maize, beans, squash, chilies and flowers grew on top. With water always close below, farmers got several harvests a year.

Canal A channel of water on every side. Canals let canoes reach each field, and water soaked into the field from below.

Canoe A dugout canoe carved from one tree trunk. Farmers used it to bring mud and plants, and to carry harvests to market.

Lake bed The bottom of the shallow lake. The chinampa was built up from it and anchored to it, so it never floated.