

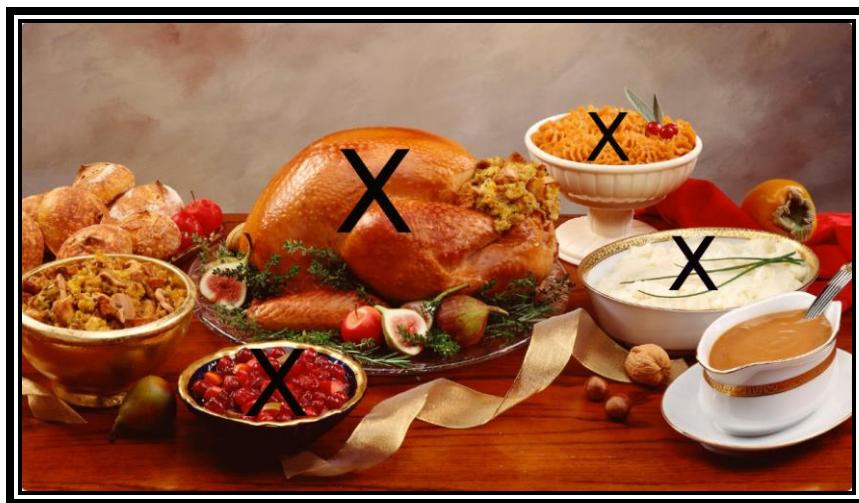
GIFTS OF FOOD FROM AMERICAN INDIANS

by Jim Rementer, Secretary
Culture Preservation Committee
Delaware Tribe of Indians

Many of the foods we eat today were either developed by or use ingredients made possible by the agricultural or culinary skill of the native people of the Americas. When we have Thanksgiving Dinner some of the items on the table which were developed or gathered by the Indians are potatoes, corn, green beans, cranberries, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, and pecans. The turkey itself is a bird native to the Americas. Here is a table set with a typical Thanksgiving Dinner:



Now we will mark with a large X the foods that would be missing had they not been developed or used by generations of American Indian people:



Other foods developed, grown, or gathered by the American Indians are avocados, peanuts, pineapples, tomatoes, peppers, sunflowers, and squashes. It would be difficult to say which was the greatest single food gift to the world, corn or potatoes, as both are now so widely grown throughout the world. We will look first at corn, also known as maize, because it has been grown in North America longer than potatoes.

Corn (Maize) - began to be developed in Mexico about 7,000 years ago from a grass-like plant called Teosinte. Many years of selecting only the best and largest heads of this grain caused it to become the ears of corn similar to what we know today. Once corn had become such a productive food crop, it began to be passed from tribe to tribe until it spread throughout North America. It arrived in the southwest about 2,300 years ago and the east coast about 1,000 years ago. The tribes in these diverse areas also picked the types of corn which grew best in their climate, and thus we now have varieties which grow well in the moist lands of the southeast, others suited to the arid lands of the southwest, and still others which do best far to the north where there is only a short growing season.



Women Planting Corn

Corn was the most revered vegetable to many Indian tribes (Do not confuse this with the British use of the word "corn" which they sometimes use to refer to all grains). Many tribes had ceremonies or dances celebrating corn, especially Green Corn ceremonies which celebrated the time when the corn was first getting ripe. It was a time for the people to give thanks to the Creator for having given them such a wonderful food.

Potatoes - which were native to South America had not yet reached the tribes of North America at the time the first Europeans arrived. In place of the potato many tribes raised or gathered various tubers (the thick part of the roots of some plants, such as potatoes). One of these was the tuber of a variety of sunflower. It is sometimes found today in grocery stores under the name Jerusalem artichoke (although these tubers had nothing to do with Jerusalem nor were they artichokes) or as some people call them, Sunchoke. One of the other primary tubers eaten by many tribes is the tuber of a plant called *Apium americana*, sometimes known as Groundnut.

Beans - of some types were known in Europe and other countries, but the European explorers found many new types of these legumes which had been developed by the American Indians. Most of the most common beans (*Phaseolus* spp.) eaten today came from the Americas. We know these as kidney beans, lima beans, navy beans, pinto beans, string beans, etc.. Runner bean vines were an important segment of the "three sisters" cultivation along with corn and squash.

Peanuts - like Beans listed above they were also a type of legume and not a nut. They were a native plant of South America and were found in northern Peru as early as 7,500 years ago. At the time the Europeans came to the New World, cultivated species was known and grown widely throughout the tropical and subtropical areas. They had reached north to Mexico, and east to Brazil, as well as the warm lands of Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, were grown extensively in Peru.

Sweet Potatoes - are another gift from the Indian farmers. The name is misleading as they are not potatoes, but they are a type of Morning Glory which forms a tuber. Over many thousands of years by careful selection Sweet Potatoes increased in size and yield to give us what we have today. They are sometimes called Yams, but true Yams are an entirely different plant from other countries.

Pumpkins and Squash - which are related plants, have been raised in North America for thousands of years. Unfortunately, many people do not realize what a delicious and wholesome food pumpkins are, and just use them to carve faces at Halloween and then discard them.

Sunflowers - are a crop developed by the Indians of North America. The Europeans had no idea what this new plant was. One explorer described it in 1585 as "a great herb in the form of a Marigold, about six foot in height." He said the Indians toasted the seeds to eat out of the hand or ground into meal for making both bread and broth. Sunflowers have become one of the main oil-bearing plants raised today, and now every grocery store carries sunflower oil for cooking purposes. They are also sold roasted as a snack food.

Chili Peppers - were also grown in parts of North America, and soon after they were discovered by the explorers they were spread to many other parts of the world. In addition to being important in Mexican and Tex-Mex cooking, Chili Peppers are found in many of the spicy foods of various international cuisines.

Chocolate - is one of the most popular foods developed in the Americas. Scientists have determined that it has been in use by Native Americans for at least 4,000 years. Its earliest use seems to have been mainly as a drink. Chocolate is made from the beans found in cacao pods from the *Theobroma cacao* tree. It was cultivated in an area near the Pacific and Gulf coasts of Central America, mainly in Guatemala and Belize. The Tribes which raised and used chocolate were Olmecs, Mayans, and Aztecs. The word chocolate itself probably comes from the Aztec name for the chocolate drink - *xocolatl*. Evidence of chocolate has even been found north of Mexico in Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon. The discovery, dated to between A.D. 1000 and 1125, indicates trade was underway between the Chaco Canyon residents and cacao growers in Mexico and Central America.

Vanilla - comes from orchids of the genus *Vanilla*. While the major species of vanilla orchids are now grown around the world, they originally came from Mesoamerica, including parts of modern day Mexico and Guatemala. The vanilla orchid is a vine-like plant that grows up trees. The vine can grow up to 30 feet long. Vanilla is the only edible fruit of the orchid family, the largest family of flowering plants in the world.

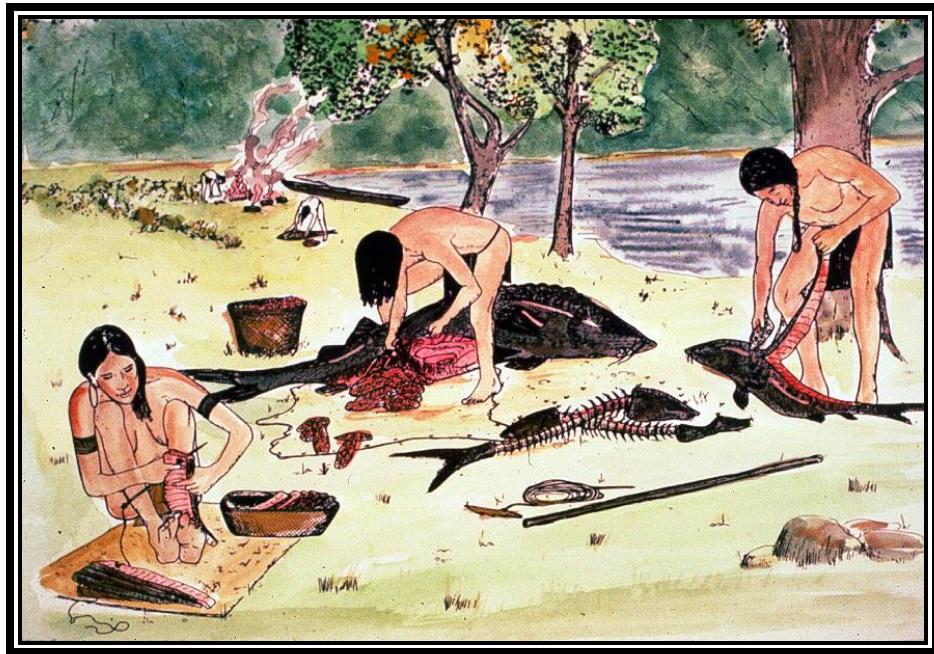
Turkeys - there is evidence that several groups of Indian people began to domesticate turkeys as early as 800 B.C.. That was in south-central Mexico, and again in what is now the southwestern U.S. at about 200 B.C.. In addition to raising or hunting turkeys to eat, their feathers were used in rituals and ceremonies. The feathers were also used to make robes or blankets. These feather robes were made throughout the southeastern part of North America and extended along the east coast as far north as the Lenape or Delaware Indians in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Most Indian people of North America had no domesticated animals which they raised for food, so they hunted various animals and fowls, as well as catching fish. These provided the major part of the required fat and animal protein for their diet. In many parts of the country the cultivation of corn, beans, and squash, plus the collecting of wild plants, provided the balance of the foods needed for good health.

OTHER FOODS

Most tribes also depended on wild plants for their food. Some of these plants were given strange names by the Europeans, such as Pigweed (*Amaranthus*), Duck potato (*Sagittaria*), American Water lotus (*Nelumbo lutea*), and Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*). Other common foods collected from the wild were Blackberries, Blueberries, Strawberries, Raspberries, Cranberries, Grapes, Paw-Paws, Persimmons, Acorns, Wild Rice, and the sap from Maple trees to make Maple syrup. One of the more recent grains added to popular use is Quinoa which originated in the Andean region of Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and Colombia, and was domesticated 3,000 to 4,000 years ago for human consumption.

Indian cooking in North America was quite varied and differed from one part to another. Differences in climate and region would determine how foods would grow in any one area. Foods eaten in one area were often as different from foods in another area as are Chinese and French cooking. The people near the Great Lakes ate Wild Rice, Venison, Fish, Corn, Berries, and various wild plant foods. The people who lived along the seacoasts usually depended heavily on fish, oysters, clams, and other things from the sea.



Lenape Indians Preparing Sturgeon They Caught

Most American Indian tribes freely shared their bounty of foods with the Europeans. Among many tribes one of the main teachings was not to be stingy with food as you would displease the Creator and then you too would be out of food. Many of the early Colonists were not farmers and were unfamiliar with these new plants and at first made no attempt to learn how to grow the native plants. Instead, when they ran short of food they had to keep asking the Indians to give away more and more of their own food stored away for the winter.

We should be thankful that American Indians were such good farmers and were able to develop many of the delicious foods we eat today and also that they shared their foods with the rest of the world.