



## TASTE TEST:



# The Fascinating History of Native American Foods



What are some of your favorite foods? Do you know where they were first eaten? You might be able to guess for some of these foods, but others might surprise you. For instance, if you enjoy popcorn, chocolate, or maple syrup, you are eating foods that we can thank Native Americans for introducing to our diets. In fact, these are just some of the foods indigenous to the Americas, meaning that they were first eaten in North, Central, or South America. It is calculated that about 60% of the foods we eat today are ones that originated in the Americas

## Have you heard of the **THREE SISTERS**?

If you haven't, the Three Sisters are three vegetables – corn, beans, and squash – that Natives grew together in their gardens.

The eldest sister, known as corn, would be planted first and the beans would be planted at the base of the corn stalks. The stalks offer the bean vines climbing support as they reach from the earth for sunlight. The beans, in turn, pump beneficial nitrogen back into the soil, fertilizing the corn and squash. The youngest sister, the squash, has broad, spiny leaves that protect the bean plants from predatory animals, keep moisture in the soil, and prevent weeds from growing.



From the Hopis of the Southwest to the Oneidas of the Midwest and the Iroquois in the Northeast, the Three Sisters were so important to many different tribes. They appear in traditional stories across the continent, and are thought to offer a spiritual connection to the Earth.

Even if you already knew about the Three Sisters, did you know there is also a fourth sister, the sunflower? Many of you may have tried sunflower seeds... delicious and nutritious. This sister also supports the beans, lures birds from the corn with her seeds, and attracts insects, which help pollinate the garden. Not only can the seeds be eaten, the sunflowers can also be used to make decorative dyes.



Another popular food from the Americas is avocado. now a mainstream favorite fruit. They are native to Mexico and Central America. A fun historical fact is that avocados used to be called alligator pears due to their color, shape, and rough skin. Whatever you call them, when you have guacamole you are eating a food first grown by Native inhabitants of the Americas.

How about cranberries? Did you know that early colonial settlers called them “bearberries” because bears ate them? Later, European settlers called them “craneberries” because they felt the flower, stem, calyx, and petals resembled the neck, head, and bill of a crane. Well, before European settlers arrived in North America, the Wampanoags of eastern Massachusetts called them Sasumaneash, or “sour berries.” To this day, cranberries have a special place in Wampanoag culture, as this community still celebrates a cranberry harvest celebration each year.

## Interested in learning more about **cranberries** and Wampanoag culture?



- Visit this link from the Aquinnah Wampanoag Tribe for more information on Wampanoag traditions, including Cranberry Day: <https://wampanoagtribe-nsn.gov/ancientways>
- Watch this video from the Boston Children's Museum featuring two Native American people with Wampanoag heritage share about Cranberry Day activities: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbirl4fuxfE>

Clearly, the food on our plates would be very different today without the introduction of these foods first eaten by Native Americans. Whatever your favorite foods are, let's continue to enjoy and celebrate the richness and biodiversity of our Earth and make sure to give thanks for these gifts as the indigenous people do.

Here is a website that explains how to plant your very own Three Sisters' Garden. Did you know, different methods were used in different regions? There are ways that are better for wetter areas, and ways that are better for dryer areas. Which one do you think would be best for growing a Three Sisters' Garden in Connecticut? <https://www.groworganic.com/blogs/articles/three-sisters-companion-planting-method>

### ACTIVITY

#### Foods: Native or Not?

Can you guess which foods originally came from people indigenous to the Americas? Circle them below.

Corn Apples Turkey Beef Squash  
Chocolate Chicken Avocados Cranberries Honey  
Peppers Potatoes Beans Maple Syrup Tomatoes  
Olives Papaya Soybeans Pork Popcorn  
Peanuts Wheat Yams Vanilla Milk

**ACTIVITY ANSWERS:** avocados, beans, chocolate, corn, cranberries, maple syrup, papaya, peanuts, peppers, popcorn, potatoes, squash, tomatoes, turkey, vanilla, yams.



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