



FROM CORNFIELDS TO CLASSROOMS: ANCIENT MAYA FARMING WISDOM AND AND INDIGEINNOVATION IN HISTORY EDUCATION



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Worksheet Link:



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Lesson Idea:

Which Image Looks like Agriculture?

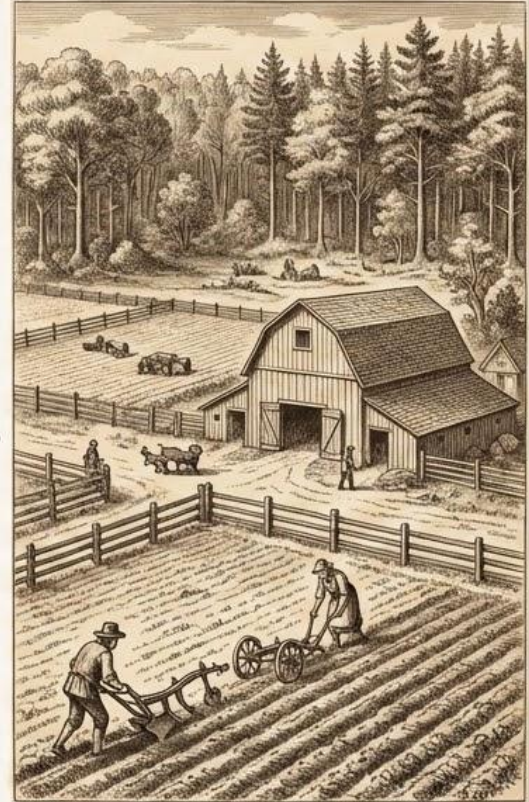


Why?

The Colonial Narrative

This is the story many of us have learned:

- 🐄 Farming begins in Europe
- 🐄 It becomes more “advanced” over time
- 🐄 Europeans bring agriculture to North America
- 🐄 Land is something to be owned, divided, and improved
- 🐄 Farming means straight rows, single crops, and cleared fields
- 🐄 Success is measured by production and efficiency
- 🐄 Farming is seen as a **sign of progress and civilization**
- 🐄 People who don't farm this way are seen as less developed
- 🐄 “Unused” land is viewed as empty or available
- 🐄 Nature is something to control, manage, or change



Result:

Europeans “teach” the
Natives how to farm

This narrative leads to
one of land dispossession
and cultural
cultural genocide



One Exception to the Narrative.....



How did he learn how to speak English?

How did Tisquantum's People, the Wampanoag, learn how to grow corn?



The Origin of Corn




9,000 years ago — southern Mexico (Balsas River Valley)

The Wild Ancestor



Teosinte: A wild grass with small, hard kernels, unlike modern corn.

Human Innovation

-  People, as hunter-gatherers, observed and selected plants.
-  Over generations, they chose seeds that were easier to eat and planted them.
-  Through careful selection, teosinte transformed into corn.

The Result



Why this matters: This wasn't accidental! It shows careful observation, patience, and deep knowledge of the land. Corn is a human-created plant.

Lesson Idea:



Questions to Consider:

- 🌽 What does corn represent in the story, not just as food, but in people's lives?
- 🌽 How is this story different from how we usually learn about farming or food?
- 🌽 What does this story teach about the relationship between people and the land?
- 🌽 How is your local land similar or different, and how might that change how people grow or care for food?
- 🌽 What foods do you and your family gather, grow, or make, and why are they important?



The Maya and the Cultural Significance of Corn



The Maya believed humans were formed from maize dough in the Popol Vuh, making corn the essence of life.



The Maize God embodied life, death, and rebirth, reflecting the agricultural cycle and the renewal of seasons.



Planting and harvest rituals aligned with their sacred calendar, linking corn's growth to spiritual cycles.

Corn's abundance was the foundation for sustaining cities like Tikal and Copán, fueling both society and spirit.



The Maya Milpa System: Indigenous Innovation



- The Milpa system intercropped corn, beans, and squash, each playing a role: corn provided structure, beans enriched soil with nitrogen, and squash covered the ground to retain moisture and suppress weeds.
- Corn and beans combined to form a complete protein, providing balanced nutrition.
- Through nixtamalization, treating corn with lime, the Maya unlocked **niacin (vitamin B3)**, preventing malnutrition.
- This Indigenous agricultural wisdom sustained soil fertility, boosted yields, and supported communities for generations.



How Corn Moved Across the Americas



Indigenous Trade Networks

Built on cooperation and exchange



Shared Seeds & Knowledge

Farmers improved crops to meet community needs.



Trade & Resources

Corn traded for food, tools, and other essential items



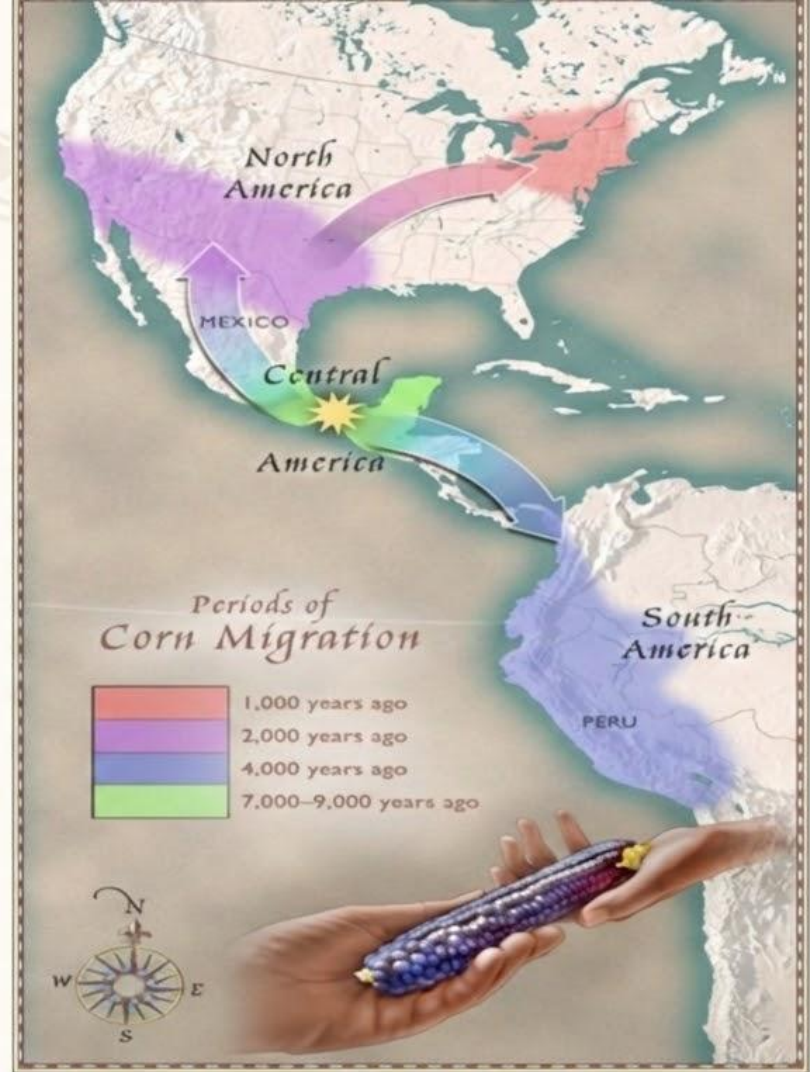
Adaptation & Selection

Seeds carried, planted, and adapted to new climates and tastes



Scientific Evidence

Archaeological and DNA findings confirm breeding with new varieties



Activity Idea:

Grow Your Own Corn (See Sheet)

Flint Corn

- Grown in the Great Lakes, Northeast, and Plains
- Cold-hardy and matures quickly
- Hard outer shell helps with storage through long winter
- Hard, shiny kernels
- Often **multicolored** (reds, blues, yellows)
- Very firm and smooth



Flour corn

- Grown in the **Southwest and dry regions**
- Soft kernels, easy to grind
- Adapted to **low water and daily food use**
- Softer, more **dull-looking kernels**
- Often **solid colors** (blue, white)
- Easier to crush



Popcorn

- Grown in **multiple regions** across the Americas
- Small, hard kernels that store well
- Useful for **transport** and **long-term storage**
- Small, round, very hard kernels
- Tightly packed on the cob



Sweet corn

- 🌽 Developed in eastern North America
- 🌽 Eaten fresh during harvest
- 🌽 First recorded by Europeans in 1779 who observed the Haudenosaunee eating it
- 🌽 Selected for taste rather than storage
- 🌽 Plump, juicy kernels
- 🌽 Usually bright yellow or white
- 🌽 Softer when fresh



Chapalote (Mexico)

- One of the oldest known varieties from northern Mexico
- Adapted to hot, dry climates
- Resistant to pests and environmental stress
- Slender ears
- Often reddish or brown kernels



Lesson Idea:
Identify the type of Corn

Milpa System → The Three Sisters



**Mesoamerica:
Milpa**



**Eastern Woodlands:
Three Sisters**

Indigenous farmers grew crops together, not separately. As corn moved north, this knowledge moved too.



Different types of beans

- Some climbed tall corn stalks
- Others stayed low and bushy
- Selected for soil health, yield, and local growing conditions



Different types of squash

- Varied in size, thickness, and taste
- Used for food, storage, and protection of soil



Different soil practices

- Fish used as fertilizer in some regions
- Other natural materials used depending on local resources

The Diverse Role of Corn in Indigenous Cultures



The role of corn in cultures is as diverse as the Indigenous cultures in the Americas.




Do your **own** research into the **histories** and **and cultures** of your **communities**.

Corn in Wisconsin: Indigenous Histories Are Not the Same

The Three Sisters System (Ho-Chunk Focus)

- Long-standing agriculture in southern/central WI
- Integrated **Corn** (structure), **Beans** (nitrogen), **Squash** (cover)
- Tied to village life & seasonal cycles

Diverse Food Systems (Menominee, Ojibwe)

-  **Corn** present but not always central
-  Relied heavily on **Wild Rice** (Manoomin), fishing, and hunting
-  Systems based on local land & water relationships

Key Adaptation: Wisconsin's shorter growing seasons required hardy "flint corn" varieties and careful local seed saving for over 1,000 years.



12th Annual Indigenous Farming Conference, White Earth Reservation, MN

On March 6-8 over 250 participants gathered at

Keeper of the Fire

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Bodwewadmi Ktëgan (Potawatomi Farm)

Bodwewadmi Ktëgan is a farm owned by the Forest County Potawatomi. The farm's mission is to provide a natural, sustainable source of vegetables, fruits, greens and animal proteins to the tribal community. All products are available to the tribal community and general public.

Information

Bodwewadmi Ktëgan Home

Events

Products

- Beef
- Buffalo
- Chicken (Meat & Farm Fresh Eggs)
- Pork
- Seasonal Produce

Bodwewadmi Ktëgan

Fertile Ground for Indigenous Food Sovereignty

UW researchers are partnering with Wisconsin's tribes to preserve traditional agricultural practices.

By Megan Provost '20



Paul Lema '24, MS'26, a graduate student in Biological Systems Engineering, harvests Ho-Chunk corn at the West Madison Agricultural Research Station in September. BRUCE RICHTER

NATIVE AMERICAN ISSUES

How tribes in Wisconsin are reintroducing the bison with an eye toward food sovereignty and cultural revitalization

One future goal is to harvest bison meat for tribal citizens as a healthy alternative to Western beef.



Frank Vaisvilas
Green Bay Press-Gazette

Jan. 5, 2023, 5:03 a.m. CT

MINDFUL VILLAGE: Many Wisconsin communities are returning to Wisconsin's Native American roots.

← Back to The Rubber

A HO-CHUNK STORY OF WILD BEARIES

Hailey Rose

September 11, 2025

Food & Drink | History | Ho-Chunk Nation

Agriculture Across the Great Plains

Indigenous Adaptations & Traditional Methods

- Montana's Indigenous nations adapted farming to local landscapes
- Seed saving and crop selection skills transferred from corn to wheat production
- Traditional farming methods included corn, but were not the primary food source



Painted Mountain
Corn



Black Coco Beans



Spaghetti Squash and
local pumpkins

Colonization & Shift in Survival

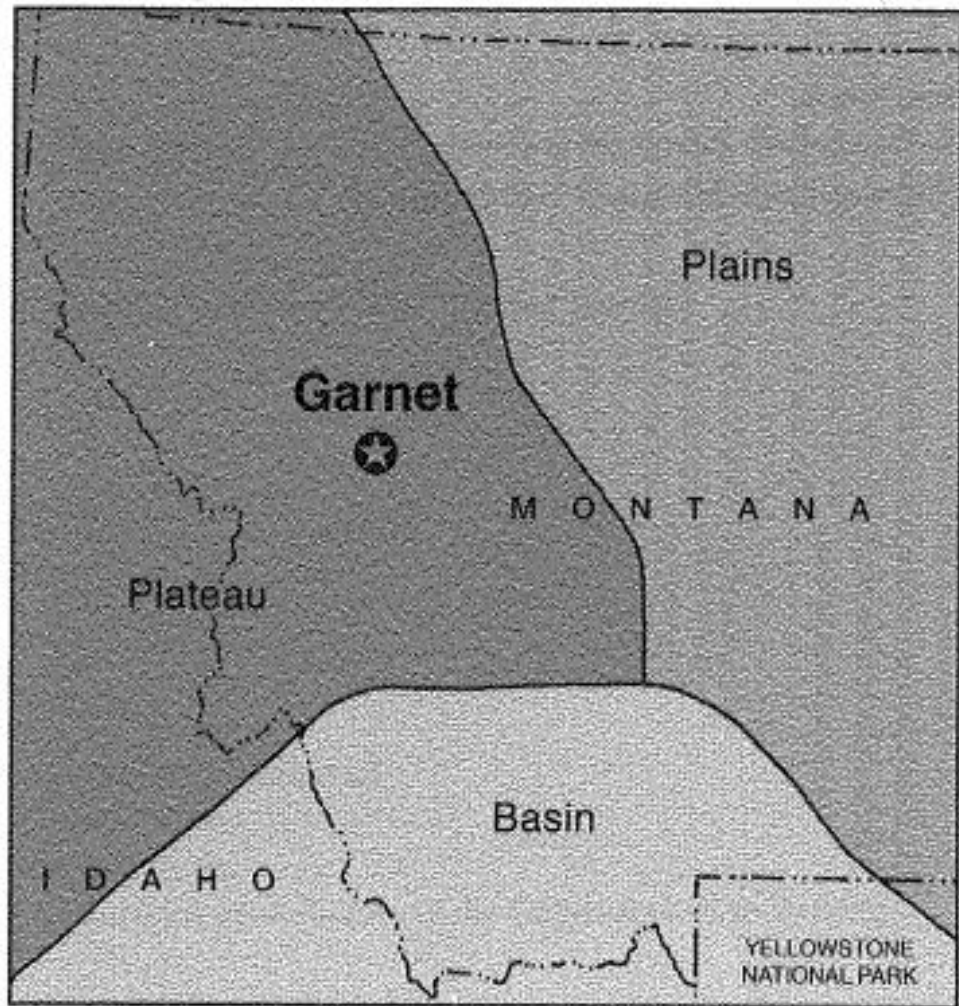
- Hunting, gathering, and later wheat and beef production became more central to survival as the area was colonized



wheat field



cattle and bison



Diverse Landscapes and People

Communication and Trade

- Salish-Forest Cultivators
- Shoshone- “Sheepeaters”
- Blackfoot-Bison

[IndigiKitchen](https://www.indigikitchen.com/)

Modern Era: From Three Sisters to Wheat Fields



Effort to return to traditional foods in the modern era

- Indigenous agricultural knowledge is transforming Montana's farming practices
- Wheat became a major crop, replacing some traditional corn-based systems
- Native communities adapted to new agricultural technologies and economic needs

[Buffalo Nations Indigenous Food Lab](#)



NATION

Black History

Add Topic +

New Alabama sculpture park, Black history museums are changing the way history is told



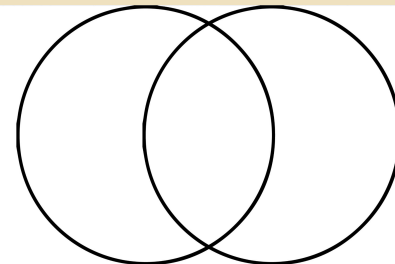
Deborah Barfield Berry
USA TODAY

March 18, 2024 | Updated March 27, 2024, 2:38 p.m. ET

Keepunumuk: Weeâchumun's Thanksgiving

Story

Lesson Idea



"Three Sisters", by Cliff Fragua, at the Equal Justice Center's Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery, Alabama. Mickey Welsh





Corn was not just a crop that “spread.” It represents **Indigenous scientific knowledge, adaptation, and intertribal exchange networks** that challenge colonization-centered narratives of North American history.

Final Takeaways and Questions to Consider:



Indigenous agriculture is a vital, ongoing system, not just history.
Corn exemplifies Indigenous innovation, but it's one of many stories.



What narrative dominates...
Is it progress, ownership,
and land acquisition?



Or is it relationship,
responsibility, and care?

Indigenous communities have long sustained themselves and the land. Why is this perspective often overlooked?
If agriculture has many stories, why teach only one?



Consider how you can expand the narrative... What examples, beyond corn, show diverse Indigenous innovation? What small change can you make...

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