

NORTH AMERICAN Native Foods

Overview

Working with actual or illustrated examples of food, students discover that native North Americans had varied diets based on indigenous plants and animals. They learn that environment influenced the foods that were available and that many foods eaten today are not native.

Objectives/Skills

Students will

- learn about foods eaten by native North Americans before and after the arrival of Europeans
- practice the skills of research, classification, making predictions, hypothesizing and testing hypotheses, and cooperative learning

Subjects

Social studies, science, language arts

Age Level

Grades 3 through 5

Time Required

Variable

Materials

- nonperishable food from home
- (or) magazines and catalogs showing animals, fruits, and vegetables
- (or) art supplies
- base map showing continents
- reference books about food plants and animals
- pencil and paper

Background

Native Americans have lived in North America for at least 12,000 years. The earliest inhabitants probably crossed the Bering Strait from Asia during the last Ice Age. For most of the millennia since that time, native peoples ate wild plants and animals. Eventually, the major domesticated plants of squash, beans, and maize (corn) were grown in much of the Western Hemisphere during prehistoric times. In the squash family were the pumpkin, and summer and acorn squashes. The bean family included the common green, kidney, pinto, lima, and tepary varieties. Sunflowers were another important food crop in some native North American gardens.

Environment helped to determine which foods were consistently reliable. For example, in the southwestern, eastern, and midwestern portions of the continent, beans, squash, and corn—grown almost as far north as the modern U.S.-Canada border—were important. In coastal regions, fish, shellfish, and coastal mammals were readily available. In the Plains and most inland northern areas, large mammals—such as bison

on the Plains and caribou in the North—provided important food sources. However, across the continent, people also ate wild berries, roots (bulbs or tubers), seeds, nuts, fish, and mammals that were indigenous. Many foods eaten in North America today, and many eaten by historic native groups, were introduced by travelers and immigrants.

Procedure

1. Assemble a representation of edible plants and animals. This can be done by asking each student to
 - bring a nonperishable food from home;
 - select a picture from a magazine or plant catalog of an animal that can be eaten, or a locally grown fruit or vegetable; or
 - draw a picture of a plant or animal.
2. Divide students into cooperative groups and have them share their foods or pictures. Ask each group to predict the foods that are native to North America, and ask them to read the ingredients of any processed food to determine the primary ingredient.

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Examples of Native and Introduced Foods

Native

beans, squash, pumpkin
corn, wild rice
peccary, bison, wild turkey
blackberry, wild plum and grape
sunflower seed

Introduced

English peas, melons
wheat, rice
pig, cattle, chicken
peach, apple, orange
peanut

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3. Instruct students to use an encyclopedia, dictionary, or other reference books to research the continent of origin for each food. Ask each group to write the names of each food or primary ingredient on a base map of the continents to show where various foods originated.

4. Reassemble the students and ask them to identify native North American foods and those that were introduced. When this task has been completed, share the background information with them. Based on their list of indigenous foodstuffs, ask students to plan a Native American menu.

5. If actual foods were brought from home, consider donating these to a food bank or charitable organization.

Extensions

For older students:

1. Have students determine the food group of each food.

2. Discuss the meaning of the terms "wild" and "domesticated." How are animals and plants domesticated?

3. Discuss seasonality and how this would have affected food available to Indians. Many plants could be gathered or harvested at specific times. What did this mean to native inhabitants 500 years ago? Discuss the ways in which foods could have been stored.

4. Ask students to write stories about a Native American child trying a European food for the first time.



5. List the food items served at one lunch in the school cafeteria. Which of these foods could have been eaten in North America 500 years ago?

6. Go on a nature walk near your school. What edible plants or animals do the students see?

For younger students:

1. Give each child a mixture of edible Native American garden seeds, such as corn nuts, sunflower seeds, roasted pumpkin seeds, and dried beans.

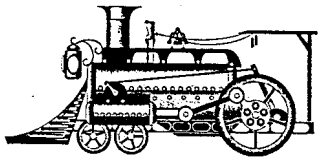
2. Ask each child to
- sort the seeds into piles based on appearance;
 - describe the appearance and shape of the seed types;
 - count each pile and compare the number of seeds in each pile;
 - identify the seeds; and
 - eat the seeds!

Evaluation

Have students draw pictures of a Native American meal 500 years ago.



This lesson was submitted by Nancy Hawkins, an archaeologist with the State of Louisiana, Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, Office of Cultural Development, P.O. Box 44247, Baton Rouge, LA 70804; (504) 342-8170. Illustration by Peter Bigelow; courtesy of the Florida Agriculture in the Classroom Program, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.



The Education Station invites examples of lesson plans and activity ideas, comments about useful resources, and articles about unique approaches to teaching archaeology. Illustrations and black and white photos are welcomed. Send material to Cathy MacDonald, Social Sciences Department, Fr. Austin Secondary School, 570 Walsh Drive, Port Perry, Ontario, Canada L9L 1K9.

Help Archaeologists Learn about the Past

Archaeologists learn about Native American lifeways, including foods, by excavating well-preserved sites. Using careful scientific methods, they recover tiny pieces of bone, seeds, nut shells, and other remains. Specialists identify these small fragments. Radiocarbon dating of charcoal or other carbon-based materials reveals the approximate age of the sites from which artifacts were recovered.

Students and teachers can help to protect archaeological sites by never disturbing or digging in them and by letting an archaeologist know when they think they have found a site.