Corn (Ewáchim-neash)

Growing, gathering and hunting for food was very important to both the Wampanoag and Pilgrims. For both cultures, good or bad harvests could mean the difference between comfort and hardship.

There were four ways the Wampanoag gathered food during the 1600s and before. These were hunting, fishing, harvesting wild plants and the planting of crops. The Wampanoag have been planting crops for about 1,200 years.

Many animals were hunted and eaten including deer, moose, beaver, rabbit, skunk and raccoon. Whatever was hunted became not only food, but the whole animal was used for other things. Hides were used for clothing and materials for many things, the bones were used for tools, and the sinew for sewing.

The Wampanoag fished in the fresh-water ponds and rivers for herring, trout, perch, catfish and eels. They also fished in the saltwater ocean for cod, tautog, pollock, bluefish, flatfish, bass, sea eels, mackerel and others. The men even went out on whaling trips too. Women usually caught shellfish such as oysters, soft-shelled clams, quahogs, mussels, razor clams, lobsters, crabs, and conch.

Many different kinds of nuts, berries, greens, and mushrooms were gathered from the woods and other places. Corn (what the Wampanoag called ewáchim-neash) was the most important staple food grown by the Wampanoag.

Winthrop wrote: “Nature hath delighted itself to beautify this Corne with a great variety of colours.” The chief variety of native corn (they sometimes called it ‘Indean Corne’) in the Cape Cod area was the northern flint variety usually in either white or yellow colors.

Corn (from The Daily Meal)

In the northern flint each plant only bore two, relatively short ears with only about eight rows of kernels and 30 to 40 kernels in a row. As Winthrop noted, there was “a great variety of colors including white corn, black corn, cherry red corn, yellow, blue, straw-colored, greenish and speckled.”

These were added to soups and other dishes such as nasaump, a thick and filling food made of corn. Some of the nuts and berries were eaten fresh, while others were dried and stored for future use.

Planting

Wampanoag planting customs have been passed down for generations. Each Wampanoag family generally provided for its members, but there was also a great deal of sharing of food.

Sachems (leaders) supported widows and the poor, and families gave freely to the sick or elderly. Families planted on ground assigned to them, while hunting, fishing and gathering took place on commonly held lands. Since food came from local resources that were shared or assigned, the diet varied little between social levels. In general, everyone in the community ate equally well.

Plimoth Patuxet depiction of Wampanoag caring for corn

Planting began in the spring. With grateful-ness for the gifts from Mother Earth, the Wampanoag caught fish called herring as they ran up the rivers and used them to help fertilize the planting lands.

Corn seeds were put into soft earth mounds covering the herring. Around the time the corn plants were the height of a human hand, it was time to plant the beans and squashes (including pumpkins) around the base of the corn.

As the corn grew, the beans climbed and wound around the corn stalks.

Since the 1600s, we have discovered that beans add nitrogen, an important nutrient the corn uses up, to the soil. It is clear to Wampanoag people that their grand-parents followed the Creator’s instructions for growing these plants together.

Melons, smaller versions of modern water-melons, were part of the Wampanoag gardens and offered a sweet treat.

As the squash and melon leaves grew large enough, they helped to keep the weeds down and the ground moist around the mounds during the warmest time of year.

Corn

Archaeologists and botanists long puzzled over the origins of corn domestication, and there were lively debates throughout the early 20th century. Now, the evidence seems clear that corn derives from a wild grass, teosinte.

Around 9,000 years ago, indigenous people in Central America (Mexico and Guatemala) figured out how to modify the wild grass to get it to produce larger seed kernels, finally producing an edible version of the plant.

Fairly rapidly (in evolutionary terms), the first domesticators shared seeds along their trade routes and corn traveled both north and south. Archeologists have dated the first evidence of corn in the Southwestern United States at about 4,000 years ago. It is thought to have reached the Northeastern United States about 2,100 years ago.

So by the time the Pilgrims arrived from England on the Mayflower, the Native Americans they met had long been engaged in extensive trade networks that spanned the entire continent.

But the remarkable fact is that the first humans to settle the Americas not only domesticated native plants like corn, squash, beans, tomatoes and more, but they also shared their knowledge of these plants with each other across vast distances.

For the most part, foods were eaten when they were available. Some foods, however, were preserved by drying or smoking. At harvest time, beans would be picked and eaten fresh, or dried and saved for winter food or for seeds.

All corn would be dried on the cob. Some dried kernels would be removed to parch over a fire and then were pounded into nokehig, a fine corn flour used for a traveling food as well as thickening for soups. Seeds were saved from all the best plants for planting the following year.

All squashes were sliced and dried for later use, although some would be cooked fresh as well. The melons could not be preserved, so they had to be eaten as soon as they were ripe. Farmed foods such as corn and beans made up about 70% of the Wampanoag diet. Although the Wampanoag favored meat, meat made up less than 20% of their diet. Roots, berries and other gathered plant materials, as well as eggs, fish, and shellfish (both fresh and dried) made up the rest.

Corn has always been a versatile crop. Easily stored and preserved, it was an essential crop for the Native Americans.

Every part of it could be used, generating no waste at all. The corn itself could be ground into cornmeal for cornbread, corn syrup, and corn pudding. It could be dried out and used to make hominy, where the dried kernels are soaked in a wood ash lye and water solution until they split open, then drained and cooked over a fire.

The husks could be woven into mats or baskets or used to create dolls and other figures. Even the cobs found a use as fuel to burn, as ceremonial rattling sticks, or carved to create darts. Across the Americas, Native peoples bred different varieties and invented literally hundreds of recipes and ways to use corn. Today, corn cultivation is global, and the US is the single largest producer.

The Pilgrims Arrive at Plymouth

When the Wampanoag watched the Mayflower's passengers come ashore at Patuxet, they did not see them as a threat.

"The Wampanoag had seen many ships before," explained Tim Turner, Cherokee, manager of Plimoth Plantation's Wampanoag Homesite and co-owner of Native Plymouth Tours.

"They had seen traders and fishermen, but they had not seen women and children before. In the Wampanoag ways, they never would have brought their women and children into harm. So, they saw them as a peaceful people for that reason."

But they did not greet them right away either.

The English, in fact, did not see the Wampanoag that first winter at all, according to Turner. "They saw shadows," he said.

The colonists' first glimpse of the new land was a vista of dense woods. The settlers might not have survived had it not been for the help of friendly Indians, who taught them how to grow native plants - pumpkin, squash, beans and corn.

In addition, the vast, virgin forests, extending nearly 1,300-miles along the Eastern seaboard, proved a rich source of game and firewood. They also provided abundant raw materials used to build houses, furniture, ships and profitable cargoes for export.

Squanto Saved the Pilgrims by Teaching them to Farm and Fish

The first direct contact was made by Samoset, a Monhegan from Maine, who came to the village on March 16, 1621.

Samoset told the Pilgrims that he knew of a Patuxet who could speak better English than he and that he would bring him and others to them.

The next day, he returned with Tisquantum (Squanto), a Wampanoag who befriended and helped the English that spring, showing them how to plant corn, fish and gather berries and nuts.

Squanto

In the next few days the colonists were visited by several representatives of the Wampanoag, the main Native people in the area.

Squanto was the sole survivor of the Patuxet people, having been abducted by Hunt in 1614 to be sold into slavery in Spain. He had jumped ship and gone to England where he found employment on a trip to Newfoundland and other parts, before returning home in 1618, only to find all his people dead.

Without Squanto's help and guidance, the Plymouth Colony would not have survived.

"Squanto contiued with them, and was their interpreter, and was a spetiall instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation. He directed them how to set their corne, wher to take fish, and to procure other comodities, and was also their pilott to bring them to unknowne places for their profit". (Bradford)

The Pilgrims "began to plant ther corne, in which servise Squanto stood them in great stead, showing them both ye maner how to set it, and after how to dress & tend it. Also he tould them excepte they gott fish & set with it (in these old grounds) it would come to nothing …"

"… and he showed them yt in ye midle of Aprill they should have store enough come up ye brooke, by which they begane to build, and taught them how to take it, and wher to get other provissions necessary for them; all which they found true by triall & experience."

"Some English seed they sew, as wheat & pease, but it came not to good, eather by ye badnes of ye seed, or latenes of ye season, or both, or some other defecte." (Bradford)

The Pilgrims would have starved without his help.

They considered him "a spetiall instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation." He acted as interpreter between the colonists and Massasoit, taught the Pilgrims how to fish and plant corn, how to live in harmony with the land, "and never left them till he dyed" in 1654.

In addition to Squanto, another Wampanoag named Hobbamock came and lived with the colonists "and was of great assistance to them." Plymouth Colony notes that the Separatists enforced strict sexual morals, including upon the Native Americans who lived with them.

The Pilgrims Formed a Plantation

The colonists at Plymouth called their town a "plantation," a word that comes from the word "plant."

Farming was a major part of the Pilgrims' lives.

They grew crops in large open fields. Women planted and tended vegetables and herbs in small gardens behind their houses. Because many of them had come from cities or towns in England with markets, many of the colonists had never farmed or gardened before coming to Plymouth. They were learning to feed themselves.

In the minds of English people, the perfect diet was one of meat or fish, bread or grain-based porridges, and beer. Dairy products and vegetables were eaten but were not considered essential for health.

In England, however, only wealthy people could afford to eat in this way. Poorer families ate meals of vegetables, dairy products and, when they could afford them, meat. Since hunting and trapping were the privileges of landowners, wildfowl (like turkeys) and game (like deer) were not a major part of the common person's diet.

In Plymouth Colony, however, the colonists' diet was more varied. In New England, supplies of fish and shellfish were plentiful. Without hunting restrictions, deer, wild fowl, rabbits and other small animals were available to anyone who wanted to hunt them.

The Pilgrims also brought farm animals with them, including pigs, chickens, goats, and later, sheep and cows. These animals provided meat, eggs and dairy products for the colonists.

Families in Plymouth planted enough in their fields to feed themselves. Their main crop was a kind of corn they had never seen before.

Because it was native to North America and grew better in America than English grains, the Pilgrims called it "Indian corn." The Wampanoag taught the English colonists how to plant and care for this crop.

First, they had to clear the land. They chopped down trees and pulled up grass and weeds. They dug holes in the ground and put two or three herring (a type of fish) in the hole and covered them with dirt. The herring fertilized the soil to make it good for growing corn. They planted 4-5 corn seeds in every mound. All of this work had to be done with hand tools.

Indian corn was different from the sweet yellow corn that we eat today. It had various colors – reds, blacks, yellows and whites – on the same ear, and was not eaten fresh from the cob. Instead, Indian corn was dried and then pounded into flour and cornmeal for cooking and baking. Indian corn was part of almost every meal in Plymouth Colony.

Along with Indian corn, the Pilgrims also grew some beans, pumpkins, wheat, barley, oats and peas in their fields. In the gardens near their houses, women grew many different kinds of herbs and vegetables, like parsley, lettuce, spinach, carrots and turnips. Some foods, like salt, sugar, oil and vinegar, had to be imported from England.

The combination of available meat and shellfish, Indian corn and other field crops and garden plants made the Pilgrims' diet a rich and varied one through most seasons of the year. Like the Wampanoag, however, the colonists experienced seasonal variations. Not all foods were available at every season of the year.

The Pilgrims tried to extend the life of their foods through preservation. Salting, the most common method of preservation, worked well for pork (meat from pigs) and fish. This method was sometimes combined with smoking for meats. Drying was also common. Vinegar pickles and sugar were also occasionally used to preserve foods.

Their lives depended on a good harvest.

Corn Used as Barter

As the years passed, the Pilgrims began to grow more food than they needed to eat. Farming was not just a way to eat, then, but also a way to get goods that they could trade for sugar, spices, oil, vinegar, clothes, shoes, baskets and gunpowder.

The colonists also traded their extra Indian corn with Native People to get furs. The furs were then sent back to England to be sold. The money they made from selling furs was used to buy many of the goods they imported from England.

“These things premised, I shall now prosecute ye procedings and afairs here. And before I come to other things I must speak a word of their planting this year; they having found ye benifite of their last years harvest, and setting corne for their particuler, having therby with a great deale of patience overcome hunger & famine.”

“Which maks me remember a saing of Senecas, Epis. 123. That a great parte of libertie is a well governed belly, and to be patiente in all wants.”

“They begane now highly to prise corne as more pretious then silver, and those that had some to spare begane to trade one with another for smale things, by ye quarte, potle, & peck, &c.; for money they had none, and if any had, corne was preferred before it.” (Bradford) (They used corn as barter to buy fur skins, as well as supplies they needed.)

“After harvest this year, they sende out a boats load of corne 40. or 50. leagues to ye eastward, up a river called Kenibeck; it being one of those 2. shalops which their carpenter had built them ye year before; for bigger vessell had they none.”

“They had laid a litle deck over her midships to keepe ye corne drie, but ye men were faine to stand it out all weathers without shelter; and yt time of ye year begins to growe tempestious.”

“But God preserved them, and gave them good success, for they brought home 700li, of beaver, besids some other furrs, having litle or nothing els but this corne, which them selves had raised out of ye earth.”

“This viage was made by Mr. Winslow & some of ye old standards, for seamen they had none.”

“The planters finding their corne, what they could spare from ther necessities, to be a comoditie, (for they sould it at 6s. a bushell,) used great dilligence in planting ye same.”

“And ye Gover and such as were designed to manage the trade, (for it was retained for ye generall good, and none were to trade in perticuler,) they followed it to the best advantage they could”.

“With … their corne after harvest, they gott good store of trade, so as they were enabled to pay their ingagements against ye time, & to get some cloathing for ye people, and had some comodities before hand.”

Later Construction of Grist Mill

“As also how they did pound their corne in morters, as these people were forcte to doe many years before they could get a mille.” (Bradford)

After more than a decade of laboriously grinding corn by hand in wooden mortars, the colony authorized the construction of a water-powered corn grinding mill on Town Brook in 1636.

Colonist John Jenney (who came in on the Little James in 1623) was given permission to run the mill and to take a portion of the corn that was brought for grinding as a payment or “toll.” After his death in 1644 John Jenney left the mill to his wife Sarah. Sarah, and later their son Samuel, ran the mill until 1683.

Nestled alongside Town Brook, and just a short walk from the waterfront and Mayflower II, the Plimoth Grist Mill (aka the Jenney Mill) tells the story of the grist (corn grinding) mill built by the Pilgrims in Plymouth Colony. (The Mill burned down in 1837 and was rebuilt on its original site in 1970.)

Information here is from Bradford, Mourt's, Pilgrim Hall Museum, Plimoth Patuxet.

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young