

Did you know?

Facts about Native Americans and foods indigenous to the Western Hemisphere

About sixty percent of the world's diet today is derived from foods indigenous to the Americas, including potatoes, sweet potatoes, peppers, chilies, tomatoes, corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, peanuts, wild rice, pineapple, avocado, papaya, pecans, strawberries, blueberries, cranberries, sunflowers, and even chocolate. Long before 1492, Native peoples across the Americas had cultivated more than three hundred food crops, and farming was an integral part of their lives.

Native Americans throughout the hemisphere were skilled plant breeders. Using agricultural techniques of selection and adaptation, Native Americans were able to develop plants that were specific to their geographic region. For example, near the current U.S.-Canadian border, tribes developed corn that matured in sixty days because of the short growing season.

The indigenous people of what is now Vera Cruz, Mexico, first developed the complex process for converting the pods of the vanilla orchid into the vanilla that is commonly used in cooking today. They managed to keep this process secret from the Spanish for hundreds of years after their arrival.

Native people have grown and traded corn, or maize, for more than ten thousand years. Maize originated in the Tehuacan Valley of present-day Mexico, where Native peoples cultivated the seeds of wild grass called *teosinte*. From this, they developed over 250 varieties of maize and, through trade, its cultivation spread throughout the Americas. In many Native American languages, the word *corn* means "our mother" or "our life."

The blueberry, one of the oldest foods in the world, is an indigenous wild plant from North America. Most of the blueberries that are currently sold in grocery stores were domesticated from the same type of wild blueberries that were gathered by North American Indians.

Peanuts are native to the Caribbean and were domesticated before 3000 BC by the Arawak people. Because they did not like the taste of peanuts, Spanish explorers refused to eat them, and instead chose to export them to West Africa, where they have become a culinary staple.

The word "squash" comes from the Narragansett word *askutasquash*, meaning "green thing that is eaten raw." The squash plant originated in the southern region of present-day Oaxaca, Mexico, where seeds have been found dating back to 7849 BC. Native farmers cultivated various types of squash all over North and South America, including the acorn, butternut, and Hubbard squash varieties, and pumpkins.

Many American Indians refer to squash, corn, and beans as the "three sisters." Native people recognized the symbiotic relationship between these plants and practiced a technique called companion planting, where they would grow the three crops together. The tall cornstalk provides a natural trellis for the beans; the beans take nitrogen from the air and put it into the soil, feeding the corn, bean, and squash plants; and the squash plant's large, low-lying leaves protect the roots and soil and discourages other plants from spreading and choking the corn roots.

Spirulina, a blue-green algae, was harvested from lakes by the Aztec and dried. Algae contain seventy percent protein and were a staple in their diet. Today, many health food stores sell algae.

The Maya were the first to turn cacao beans into chocolate, and invented the four step process that removed the bitterness from the cacao bean. Modern manufacturers ferment, dry, and roast cacao beans to extract chocolate in much the same way as Maya and Aztec growers did. The Aztec and Maya also used cacao beans as a form of currency to buy goods and services and pay wages. In 1545, a turkey was worth one hundred cacao beans.

Tomatoes were first domesticated in what is now Mexico and Peru as early as 700 AD. The Aztec later combined them with chilies, the Spanish called this combination salsa. Chilies were gathered in wild form in Mexico as early as circa 7000 BC and were being cultivated there before 3500 BC. The word *chile* is derived from the Nahuatl language.

The domesticated turkeys that we eat today at Thanksgiving are bred from two species indigenous to the Americas: *Meleagris gallopavo* of the eastern United States, portions of southern Canada, and northern Mexico, and *M. ocellata*, which is found in the Yucatán, Belize, and northern Guatemala. The turkey is believed to have been domesticated in Central America about three thousand years ago.

Although flour from wheat grain is now widely used throughout the Western Hemisphere, the indigenous people of the Americas have been using flours from other sources in their cooking for a long time. Until the 1500s, acorn and mesquite flours were staples for the tribes of the southwestern United States. Great Plains and Plateau communities used flours extracted from cattail and wapato plants. Manioc, amaranth, and corn flour continue to be common ingredients for Central and South American Native cuisine.

By the 1500s, the Inka of western South America had developed a method of freeze-drying potatoes that is still practiced today. The potatoes are frozen at high altitudes, which allow the moisture to vaporize. These freeze-dried potatoes, called *chuño*, last for several years and remain a part of Bolivian and Peruvian cuisine today.

Sources for these facts were taken from the following:

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3. Blue Spruce, Duane, and Tanya Thrasher, eds. *The Land has Memory: Indigenous Knowledge, Native Landscapes, and the National Museum of the American Indian*. Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian in association with University of North Carolina Press, 2008.
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5. Hoxie, Frederick E., ed. *Encyclopedia of North American Indians: Native American History, Culture, and Life from Paleo-Indians to the Present*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.
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