

The All-American Holiday Celebration

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

We Americans love our holidays! Around the world people celebrate numerous religious holidays like Christmas, Easter, Hanukkah and others. I always find it interesting to look at the holidays that a country celebrates. Like many other countries, we have a lot of holidays that were born here and celebrated primarily only here. There's the 4th of July, there's President's Day, Labor Day, Memorial Day and numerous other "American" holidays. But the one that has the deepest roots, even deeper than the 4th of July, is Thanksgiving.

I've always loved Thanksgiving. I don't know if it's because it's the time of the year, or the history it shares with the Pilgrims. Maybe it's the food, plain and simple or maybe it's because of being raised on a farm and once Thanksgiving got here it usually meant harvest was over and we were getting ready for winter. If you think about the traditional foods that we eat though, they mainly have strong American roots.

If we start with the turkey, it certainly has American roots there. The domestic turkey that most of us eat today is selected from the Wild Turkey of the Americas and is native to the US and Mexico. Early explorers (pre Pilgrim explorers) took the turkey back to Europe where it quickly became popular. As any turkey hunter can tell you, there is a big difference in the carcass/meat between wild turkeys and the domestic turkey that we purchase in the grocery store to roast or fry! As for me, I like them both!

Corn is often fixed in many different ways for Thanksgiving. It may be ground and used to make corn bread. It may be fixed as a whole kernel product like creamed corn. Regardless, corn is yet another product of the Americas. Corn, or maize, was a wild grass that became domesticated in the valleys of Mexico several thousand years ago. Once it was domesticated it quickly spread across much of the Americas and even Caribbean islands so it was wide spread once the Pilgrims landed in the early 17th century. Corn meal, used for corn bread is made from what we would call field corn. The corn we cook as whole kernel is sweet corn which has a much higher sugar content than field corn.

Sweet potatoes, sometimes called yams, are also a new world plant. Different varieties were grown in the Caribbean islands and up the east coast of the US. African slaves that arrived in the Caribbeans found the sweet potato and used it very similarly to an African root crop and started referring to it as yams. But they are different plants! Most of the sweet potatoes we eat and grow today are the Puerto Rican type displacing the New Jersey types.

So we have to finish up with pumpkins and squash. I'll cover them together because basically they are all pretty much the same. If the squash is round and orange we call it a pumpkin, if it's any other color or shape, we call it a squash. But they are all in the genus Cucurbita and fit into one of four species. Squash of all kinds were readily used by the pre-Colombian residents and the new American residents quickly took to them as well. Interestingly, there is nothing round or orange that goes into commercial pumpkin pie filling. It is generally a mix of two thirds large buff colored field pumpkins and one third butternut squash. Ironically, while I love squash, I'm not a big pumpkin pie fan!

So there you are. Thanksgiving is coming along quickly. Enjoy your family and friends, enjoy your feast and remember that most of those traditional foods are All-American! Gosh, I forgot cranberries!