

Thanksgiving, An All American Meal

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

With a few exceptions, the holidays that any country observes are unique to that country. They usually celebrate some special occasion or special event. Thanksgiving is a fascinating mix of both religious and historical origins. The Pilgrims, who came to this country for religious freedom, were thankful for having survived and they had a celebration, feast if you will, to recognize a bountiful harvest. Some things have changed over the years, but most of us still enjoy a meal that is very "American".

Let's start with the turkey. Did you think I was going to start anywhere but with the bird? The turkey is an American product. There are two true turkey species in the world, our Wild Turkey, of the US, and the Ocellated Turkey of southern Mexico and northern central America. Granted, the domesticated turkey has been heavily selected and bred and is quite different from the Wild Turkey, but it's still genetically an all-American bird!

For me, the next thing on the favorite Thanksgiving food list is cranberries. Once again, a little known marshy evergreen dwarf shrub from the Americas that we've catapulted into the spotlight of culinary greatness. This wonderful tart berry has probably gained more renown as a juice with great health benefits, but I'm still a fan of the simple berry. Many people want the jellied cranberry sauce, but just give me a dish full of the berries cooked up in water and sugar. Yup, it's acidic, but I love it!

Sweet potatoes often go by the name yam, but the yam is a different plant from Africa. While similar to our sweet potato, it's in a different family. Sweet potatoes were well known from the Caribbean Islands up the Atlantic coast. Originally, many of the sweet potatoes grown in the US were known as New Jersey types, but most of what is raised now days is known as Puerto Rican sweet potatoes. Interestingly, sweet potatoes are related to the flower morning glory! Like the not at all closely related Irish potato, sweet potatoes actual origin may be South America, but it's still the Americas and by the time Columbus and later the Pilgrims arrived, it was growing all along the eastern coast.

Winter squash and pumpkins we have to consider together, because they are essentially or botanically speaking, just variations of the same plant. Regardless, squash were grown all through the US and into southern Canada by the time the Pilgrims arrived. While most of us think of pumpkins as the nice round orange vegetable (technically a fruit) that we also make jack-o-lanterns out of, none of these usually go into commercial pumpkin pie mix. Commercial pumpkin pie mix is made of odd shaped, large field pumpkins and butternut squash.

Many people will also enjoy one or more other vegetables with dinner and green beans or corn seem to be popular. While things like peas and soybeans are known from Europe and Asia, the more popular bean, of all kinds, were cultivated in the Americas perhaps as long ago as 1000 BC. Corn was a wild grass known as teosinte that was later "tamed" and improved as much as 4,000 years ago in what is now known as Mexico and Central America.

As you can see, the majority of the traditional Thanksgiving meal has it's roots in foods that were new world based. I don't know if that's why we continue to enjoy these foods every year, or if it's just because they taste good. But I hope that everyone has a wonderful and safe Thanksgiving holiday!