

Thanksgiving Food Originations

I am excited for Thanksgiving, and one of my favorite parts of the whole affair is eating. With this holiday, it is interesting to note that much of the food traditionally consumed on Thanksgiving actually originated in the Americas.

- **Turkey:** Of all of the Thanksgiving foods, turkey is the best known. Turkey was first domesticated by the Aztecs and brought to Europe, where it is also popular as a holiday food, in the 15th and 16th centuries. It may have actually been introduced independently at different times to Europe by both the Spanish and English.
- **Potato:** Potatoes originated in South America, but were widely cultivated in the Americas before European settlement. Since being introduced to others, potatoes have become the fourth most important food crop in the world behind wheat, rice and corn. The vegetable's use is still expanding due to its nutritious nature, ease of cultivation and high yields, compared to other food crops. In the United States, almost 50 percent of all commercial potato production occurs in Idaho and Washington.
- **Sweet Potato:** Sweet potatoes are also native to South America. They were cultivated in the Caribbean, the Americas, the Pacific Islands and even the Philippines before European contact. They are usually considered just a holiday food in the United States. However, in the recent past they were a dietary staple. After the great depression, they were considered a food of the poor, and consumption dropped greatly. They still are a dietary staple in many parts of the world. Additionally, sweet potatoes (although they are commonly referred to as yams in the United States) and actual yams are two separate species and not at all related. Yams are a root crop like sweet potatoes, but of much greater size. Depending on the variety, an individual yam tuber may weigh as much as 150 pounds.
- **Squash:** There are several squash species used for food. All are native to the Americas. Squash was an essential part of the Native American diet along with beans and corn. These crops are commonly called the "three sisters." In the garden, corn provides a stalk and support for beans to grow up, beans add nitrogen to the soil and squash, especially as it matures, conserves soil moisture and reduces weed competition by shading the ground.
- **Cranberry:** There are two or three separate cranberry species that are native to the European, Asian and North American continents. However, the cranberry species we most commonly eat is only native to the Eastern United States and Canada. Unlike most other agricultural crops, almost all fruit, whether sold fresh or processed, is almost exclusively grown in these same areas. However, cranberry production is rapidly expanding in other parts of the world.

Along with these traditional foods, most other Thanksgiving favorites either originated in the Americas or, if not from the Americas, were brought from Europe and consumed by the pilgrims at their Thanksgiving feasts. May your Thanksgiving be happy and all go well for you, your family and friends.