

The Pilgrims' First Harvest Feast

The Thanksgiving holiday celebrated each November in the United States is known worldwide as an American custom, but its roots extend far back into human history. According to research conducted by The Center for World Thanksgiving at Thanks-Giving Square, the first Americans observed rituals and ceremonies to express gratitude to a higher power for life itself. A Seneca Indian ritual, for example, states, "Our Creator ... Shall continue to dwell above the sky, and this is where those on the earth will end their thanksgiving." Another quotation attributed to American Indians before Columbus is, "The plant has its nourishment from the earth and its limbs go up this way, in praise of its Maker ... like the limbs of a tree."

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According to historical sources, the Pilgrims never held an autumnal Thanksgiving feast. The Pilgrims did have a feast in 1621 near Plymouth, Massachusetts, after their first harvest. This is the feast people often refer to as "The First Thanksgiving." This feast was never repeated, so it can't be called the start of a tradition, nor did the colonists or Pilgrims call it a Thanksgiving Feast. In fact, to these devoutly religious people, a day of thanksgiving was a day of prayer and fasting.

Nevertheless, the 1621 feast has become a model for the Thanksgiving celebration in the United States. More than likely, this first harvest feast was eaten outside, based on the fact that the colonists didn't have a building large enough to accommodate all the people who came. Native Americans definitely were among the invited guests, and it's possible, even probable, that turkey (roasted but not stuffed) and pumpkin in some form found their way to the table.

The feast is described in a firsthand account presumably written by a leader of the colony, Edward Winslow, as it appears in Mourt's Relation: "Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four in one day killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest King Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty."

From this we know that the feast went on for three days, included 90 "Indians," as Native Americans were called then, and had plentiful food. In addition to the venison provided by the Native Americans, there was enough wild fowl to supply the village for a week. The fowl included ducks, geese, turkeys and even swans.

Wild Turkeys

Wild turkeys are native to North America and there are five subspecies: Eastern, Osceola (Florida), Rio Grande, Merriam's and Gould's. All five range throughout different parts of the continent. The eastern is the most common and ranges the entire eastern half of the U.S. The Osceola (Florida) is only found on the Florida peninsula, while the Rio Grande ranges through Texas and up into Oklahoma, Kansas and Colorado. Rios are also found in parts of the northwestern states. The Merriam's subspecies ranges along the Rocky Mountains and the neighboring prairies of Wyoming, Montana and South Dakota. And you can find Gould's throughout the central portion of Mexico into the southernmost parts of New Mexico and Arizona.

Between 5,000 and 6,000 feathers cover the body of an adult turkey in patterns called feather tracts. A turkey's feathers provide a variety of survival functions—they keep him warm and dry, allow him to fly, feel and show off for the opposite sex. The head and upper part of the neck are featherless, but if you look close, you can see little bumps of skin on the bare area. Most of the feathers exhibit a metallic glittering, called iridescence, with varying colors of red, green, copper, bronze and gold. The gobbler, or male turkey, is more colorful, while the hen is a drab brownish or lighter color to camouflage her with her surroundings.

Two major characteristics distinguish males from females: spurs and beards. Both sexes have long powerful legs covered with scales and are born with a small button spur on the back of the leg. Soon after birth, a male's spur starts growing pointed and curved and can grow to about two inches. Most hen's spurs do not grow. Gobblers also have beards-tufts of filaments, or modified feathers, growing out from the chest-which can grow to an average of nine inches (though they can grow much longer). It must also be noted that 10 to 20 percent of hens have beards.

Wild turkeys have excellent vision during the day but don't see as well at night. They are also very mobile. Turkeys can run at speeds up to 25 mph, and they can fly up to 55 mph.

When mating season arrives, anywhere from February to April, courtship usually begins while turkeys are still flocked together in wintering areas. After mating, the hens begin searching for a nest site and laying eggs. In most areas, nests can be found in a shallow dirt depression, surrounded by moderately woody vegetation that conceals the nest.

Hens will lay a clutch of 10 to 12 eggs during a two-week period, usually laying one egg per day. She will incubate her eggs for about 28 days, occasionally turning and rearranging them, until they are ready to hatch. A newly-hatched flock must be ready to leave the nest within 12 to 24 hours to feed. Poults eat insects, berries and seeds, while adults will eat anything from acorns and berries to insects and small reptiles.

Turkeys usually feed in early morning and in the afternoon. Wild turkeys like open areas for feeding, mating and habitat. They use forested areas as cover from predators and for roosting in trees at night. A varied habitat of both open and covered area is essential for wild turkey survival.

From only 30,000 turkeys in the early 1900s to 6.4 million today, this intriguing species has truly made an awesome comeback.

National Farm-City Week is being celebrated November 20 - 26, 2009 to recognize the importance of our farm community and the people it supports. Be sure and think about our farmers/producers as you sit down to your Thanksgiving dinner. How many farmers does it take to provide a Thanksgiving dinner? We want to have turkey with stuffing, mashed potatoes & gravy, sweet potatoes, baked corn, cranberries, rolls, pecan and pumpkin pies and cider.

Let's see.

1 Turkey producer for the turkey.
1 Dairy person for the butter to put in the stuffing and butter our mashed potatoes and rolls and to supply the milk for the mashed potatoes, baked corn and pies.
1 Poultry producer for the eggs used in the stuffing, pies, etc.
1 Wheat producer for the flour to make our bread, stuffing and pies.
1 Mushroom grower for mushrooms in our stuffing.
1 Tree nut producer for the walnuts and pecans in our meal.

1 Apple grower for apple butter, fruit salad and cider.
1 Onion grower for the onions in our stuffing.
1 Herb grower for the celery, sage and thyme used for flavoring
1 Spice grower for the spices used to flavor our stuffing, potatoes and pies and food in general. (Salt & pepper, cinnamon, vanilla, etc.)
1 Potato grower – both for sweet potatoes and white potatoes.
1 Corn grower for the corn
1 Cranberry grower for the cranberries
1 Pumpkin grower for the pumpkin

Just listing these items I come up with 14 producers involved in the very basic items needed for our Thanksgiving dinner. A long time ago you might find most of the items listed above being produced by one farmer except for the spices like pepper, cinnamon, and vanilla that come from other counties. Today most large farms produce only one item like turkeys, dairy, potatoes, cranberries, etc. Having grown up on a dairy farm our principle crop was milk, but we had chickens for eggs, and a garden for vegetables, pumpkins and sweet corn. We had a few apple and walnut trees and grew wheat for cow feed. We didn't grow mushrooms, cranberries, celery or potatoes. We bought our turkey at the grocery store and the bread man delivered the bread cubes for the stuffing if we ordered them ahead. Those were the good old days.

Farms in West Virginia tend to be more diversified and grow a variety of crops. Even if you hunt for wild cranberries and mushrooms it might be hard to come up with everything needed to make a traditional Thanksgiving meal from local sources. The other limiting factor is time needed to process everything to have it ready for the meal.

You might want to check out a local farmers market and see how much of your Thanksgiving meal you can find there. You might end up changing a few menu items. Remember no matter what you eat somebody had to grow it so you could eat it. Be thankful for the wonderful food we have.

2010 Future Harvest - CASA Annual Conference

2010 Future Harvest - CASA Annual Conference will be held January 15 & 16, at the National Conservation Training Center (NCTC) in Shepherdstown, WV. The Conference Schedule & Registration is now online at <http://www.futureharvestcasa.org/> Please Note: You must PRE-REGISTER for the conference this year due to NCTC being a federal facility. The deadline to register if you are staying overnight is December 15. Commuter deadline is January 4. There will be NO at-the-door registration this year.

2009 Pesticide Recertification Program

It's that time of year again! The Berkeley County Pesticide Recertification Program will be offered the same day at various times to accommodate individuals who need recertification credits for their Private Applicators License. Producers need to attend one of the sessions being offered in order to receive 5 recertification credits in categories 1, 11, 12, and private applicator. Ten credits are required in a three year period in order to recertify. This year's recertification program will be offered at the Farm Service Agency Office located at 1450 Edwin Miller Blvd. in Martinsburg on Wednesday, December 2 at 9:00 a.m., repeated at 1:00 p.m. and repeated again at 6:00 p.m. Producers receive 5 credits for attending one of the showings. If you cannot attend one of the above sessions, other arrangements can be made by calling the Berkeley County Extension Office at 264-1936. This year's recertification program covers the following topics: Pesticide Safety for Greenhouse Workers; Vegetable Pest Management; Sprayer Calibration; Use of Beneficial Insects; Fireblight Management; Use of Pheromones in Pest Management; and Brush Control with Herbicides. For additional information contact the Berkeley County Extension Office at 264-1936. Everyone is welcome. Those involved in the use of pesticides are strongly encouraged to attend one of these sessions. See you Wednesday, December 2th at 9:00 a.m., 1:00 p.m. or 6:00 p.m. at the FSA Office 1450 Edwin Miller Blvd., Martinsburg. Please bring your Pesticide Applicator Card with you when you attend this meeting. Thank You.

Morgan County will hold their Pesticide Recertification training December 7 at 6:00 pm. Call the Morgan County Extension Office for more information at 304-258-8400. Jefferson County will hold their Pesticide Recertification training Monday, Nov. 30 at 7 p.m.; and Tuesday, Dec. 8, at 1 pm and then again at 7:00 p.m. Call the Jefferson County Extension Office at 304-728-7413 for more information on their training.

Berkeley County Extension Office Holiday Hours

The Berkeley County Extension Office will be closed November 25 through November 27th so that we can spend time with our families. We will reopen Monday, November 30th at 8:00 a.m. We hope that you will take time to enjoy the holiday and spend time with your family/loved ones. Please think about our Military people serving our country so that we have the freedoms that we enjoy and the agricultural producers who provide the food that we have to eat. Happy Thanksgiving and safe hunting to all the hunters!

Garden Tips

- Fertilize houseplants.

Until next time ...Happy Gardening, Farming and Thanksgiving!