

I spend a lot of time thinking about food. This is in addition to the hours during which I am occupied with cooking, eating, preparing, and preserving food. There is also the time spent during the winter deciding which vegetables to grow. In the spring, there is planting, and later, mulching and weeding. By this time of year, harvest season has begun. One might think that a reprieve from thinking about food and eating would be attractive, but it is not.

The particular question on my mind today, though, is a query about the origin of certain foods. What vegetables and fruits do we commonly eat that have their beginnings here in the Americas?

Most of us are familiar with the “three sisters” that are native to North America—squash, beans, and corn. And of these, I began thinking of the frequency with which these vegetables are on our plates.

Squash—zucchini and summer squash early in the season and hard winter squash later—have long been favorites in our corner of the world. When I was growing up, there was no zucchini in our garden, but plenty of yellow crookneck summer squash was on the menu. Sometimes, my mother would just cut it up and cook it, serving the bright yellow dish with lots of butter, salt, and pepper. But, Dad liked it best when she fried the round slices of yellow summer squash. She sprinkled salt and pepper on the slices, dipped them in flour, and fried them in hot oil or butter until they were speckled with brown. I still prepare summer squash like this sometimes.

Everyone seems to have a favorite kind of hard winter squash. Although we grow several varieties and hope that some will produce well, our absolute favorite is the buttercup squash. They are bright orange, not at all stringy, and have a delicious flavor. Sometimes, I peel them and cut them in cubes before arranging them in a baking dish seasoned, dotted with butter, and with a splash of maple syrup on top. But, as an alternative, I cut out the round gray “cap” of the dark green squash, scoop out the seeds and fill the cavity with butter, salt and pepper, and maple syrup or honey. Then, I bake them as usual.

Butternut squash are good, too, as are Hubbards. The only drawback of the old favorite Blue Hubbard is that it may be so heavy that it takes a strong person to carry it out of the garden. And then, there is the issue of the hard shell. It often requires an axe to chop the squash into manageable pieces.

Beans are on our dinner table every week in some form or another. And, the beans themselves vary from one time to the next. Dry beans are such good, nutritious food that can also be stored for long periods of time. One of our favorite varieties is Tigers Eye, a large, bright tan bean with streaks of dark red. But, we also plant other varieties, and it changes year by year. This year we have planted Saturday Night Special—a small white navy bean; King of the Early—big, red and white; Black Coco—a round, shiny black bean; a red kidney bean; and a beige, speckled pinto bean. We usually also plant Swedish brown beans, but we had such a good crop last summer that we have enough for another year.

We plant green beans, too, and this year have two varieties of the thin, “filet-type” bean. Montpellier is our favorite kind, but we also have a bed of

Maxibel filets that are very long and slim.

And, then, there is corn. We aren't the sweet corn cravers that many people seem to be, but we enjoy a few meals during the season and find that we like them even better in other dishes during the winter. So, I freeze as many containers as I can. We don't plant a lot of sweet corn, and protecting it from the raccoons that must be started a little before the corn is actually ready to use is a bit of a task, but our electric sheep netting is handy for that.

The other corn we grow is, I think, much more interesting. Painted Mountain Corn is an old grinding corn, an eight row variety. So, the cobs look much slimmer than the modern corn. It is colorful corn, with hues ranging from yellow to red to blue to black, to rust and everything in between. And it makes very tasty corn meal. I add it to bread dough, make crackers, and use it like any other corn meal. Johnny cake made with Painted Mountain is a reddish beige in color, not the yellow of common corn.

So, the Three Sisters are important in our diet. And they are joined by other vegetables from North and South America—tomatoes, potatoes, tomatillos, chili peppers, sweet peppers, and sweet potatoes. Amaranth is another native crop, but we do not plant any of that. Our native pigweed is a variety that is edible, but it does not usually appear on our table.

It is clear that, wherever in the world one might reside, there is local, native food available to sustain us. We just have to adjust our diets to use what is in our own area. And it makes delicious eating.