



Submitted photo

Cranberries are not only welcomed at Thanksgiving but also touted as a health food all year because they prevent bacteria from clinging to the urinary tract.

Edible plants of the American Thanksgiving

By Arthur O. Tucker

So many garden writers have published columns on the plants of Christmas, Easter, etc., but apparently nobody considers the plants of Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving just wouldn't be the same without sage, cranberries, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, etc. The plants that we consume in late November really define this holiday, and because this is traditionally a time of family gatherings, the recipes are often passed down for generations, and even though different plants are added in different parts of the country, certain plants remain essential.

The plant most associated with the American Thanksgiving is hidden in our stuffing — sage. In times far removed from the historic record, sage was probably originally incorporated into food as a preservative, but today nobody can imagine sausage or stuffing without it. We utilize two species of *Salvia* as culinary sage, and both originated in Europe, *S. officinalis* from northern Europe (this is the one hardy in our gardens) and *S. fruticosa* ("Dalmatian" sage) from the shores of the Mediterranean.

Cranberries (mostly *Vaccinium macrocarpon*, not the rock band) are totally born and bred in North America (although some other countries have now discovered it and are cultivating it, especially for winter festivals in Europe). Native Americans introduced the colonists to cranberries as early as the 1600s, but the first recorded use in a Thanksgiving dinner wasn't until 1817. Wisconsin contributes over half of the U.S. production, while Massachusetts is second. Delaware has its own cranberry farm, the Johnson farm in Smyrna, in operation

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since 1998.

Pumpkins are also of North American origin. The name originally comes from the Greek *pepon* ("large melon"), through the French (*pompon*) and British (*pumpion*) with the American colonists changing it to pumpkin. Most edible pumpkins are of two species (*Cucurbita pepo* and *C. mixta*), although other species are grown. Illinois produces more than 95 percent of the processed pumpkin that you buy in cans, but Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and California are also top pumpkin-producing states. Besides edible fruit pulp, pumpkins also yield edible flowers, edible leaves (*seveve* in Kenya), and edible seeds (*pepitas* in Mexico).

Sweet potatoes (*Ipomoea batatas*) are also American, probably originating in Central or South America. For many older citizens of Pennsylvania, Delaware and the Eastern Shore, the coveted "Hayman," a white sweet potato, is just without peer. My mother made candied Haymans by cooking slices in butter and brown sugar until tender and crispy (no water!). "Maryland Red" is also coveted and tasty.

Parsnips (*Pastinaca sativa*) of Northern Europe were part and parcel of our Thanksgiving dinner in rural Pennsylvania. My mother candied them along with the Haymans, and leftovers were put in beef stews. Likewise, celery knobs or celeriac (*Apium graveolens*) of Northern Europe were also cubed or shredded and put in

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stuffing and stews.

Chestnuts (*Castanea spp.*, both the European chestnut and the Chinese chestnut) were also served at our Thanksgiving table, usually as a condiment: nick an "X" in the bottom of fresh chestnuts, boil in lightly salted water 20 minutes, peel, and cook chestnuts in a mixture of red wine and beef bouillon for another 15 minutes. Look for Delmarvelous Chestnuts, grown by the Pettits near Townsend.

Growing up Pennsylvanish Deitsch, we often had *schmercuse undt lekvar mit brot* (cottage cheese and apple butter on thick slabs of fresh, still hot and steaming homemade bread) as an appetizer at our Thanksgiving dinners. And our dinner was not complete without the traditional Chow-Chow! Below is a recipe for traditional Chow-Chow that our family used to make, modernized a bit with canned and frozen vegetables so that it can be made year-round.

Year-round Pa. Dutch Chow-Chow

- 1 quart tiny sweet pickles
- 1 large bag (20-24 oz. each) of frozen lima beans, carrots, green string beans, yellow string beans (or mixed peppers), and cauliflower
- 2 bunches celery

2 jars (8 oz. each) small cocktail onions (not sour onions)

- 1 can (20 oz.) kidney beans
- 1 scant tbsp. turmeric
- Pinch black pepper
- 1 jar (8 oz.) French mustard
- 7-14 tsp. each of celery seed and mustard seed
- 1 pint cider vinegar
- 1 tbsp. sugar
- Salt to taste

Wash canning jars and lids; drain. Chop celery and any large vegetables and cook in enough water to almost cover. Add remaining ingredients and bring to a rolling boil. From here, follow the modern U.S.D.A. directives for canning. Remove, cool, check seal and allow to set for at least one week before consuming. Makes about 22 pints.

I highly recommend the 2009 U.S.D.A. guide to canning, even if you have canned before; this is available as a free pdf file (for Adobe 9.2): http://nchfp.uga.edu/publications/publications_usda.html

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 302-857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the Herbarium, and call 302-857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article.