

## **Thanksgiving: The All-American Meal - Sort Of**

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

We may never know the truth about the first Thanksgiving meal, but today Thanksgiving is generally a gathering of family and friends to partake in great quantities of food (just looking at me you can see I've had my fair share!) and more importantly, fellowship. I sense that many Americans feel that the Thanksgiving feast is an all-American meal. But how much of it really is?

Let's start with that big bird on the platter, the turkey. The turkey that most of us will be eating will be a domestic turkey. There are two turkey species in the wild; the Ocellated Turkey of the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico and the Wild Turkey that is widespread across the United States, very southern Canada and northern Mexico. The domestic turkey did come from selections and breeding of the Wild Turkey so the main stay of the Thanksgiving feast truly is of American origin.

If you are also enjoying a ham at Thanksgiving, well, pigs are an import. The domestic pig of today originated from the Eurasian wild boar. There are other wild boar species in Europe and Asia, but DNA work pretty well shows that the domestic pig species we grow today were selected from Eurasian wild boars. The javelina or collared peccary, from the desert southwest may look pig like but is only distantly related to the domestic pig.

With the meat out of the way, let's get into all the rest of the trimmings that go with the Thanksgiving meal. Starting with the starches on the table - we call them Irish potatoes, but they originated in the Andes mountains of South America. Spanish explorers took them back to Europe (and Ireland) by the late 1500s. They may not have originated in the USA, but at least from the western hemisphere. Sweet potatoes are a little closer to home but in no way related to potatoes. Sweet potatoes are a tropical vine in the morning glory family. Their presumed ancestral home is Central America. For what it's worth, while many call sweet potatoes yams, the true yam is a completely different plant native to Africa!

Moving on to some of the other vegetables on the table we may have sweet corn, green beans (who doesn't like the now infamous green bean casserole), maybe collared greens or Brussel sprouts. Corn (maize) originated from Mexico and was widely grown across the southern US by indigenous peoples by the 1400s. Most of what we eat, as corn, is sweet corn which was adapted over the centuries from that original maize. Green beans are selected from the beans that were growing in Mexico and southern US by the indigenous peoples for centuries. We are batting pretty good with those two. Collards and Brussel sprouts are both in the cabbage family (Brassicacae) and are likely of northern European origin. Many different "vegetables" have been selected and developed from the wild cabbages and are noted in writings dating back thousands of years. So these two are not of American origin!

Pumpkins and squash were certainly vining plants of the Americas coming out of Mexico and Central America originally. Cranberries are also of local origin from the New England area. Pecans are native to the USA, with the modern pecans having been selected for flavor and thin shells from the native pecans. The cherries that we use in pies though came over from Asia Minor as did apples and peaches. So there you have the not always All-American origin of many of the foods we will enjoy this week! Have a Happy Thanksgiving everyone!