

CORN

Scientific Name: *Zea mays*

Dakota Name: Wamnáheza

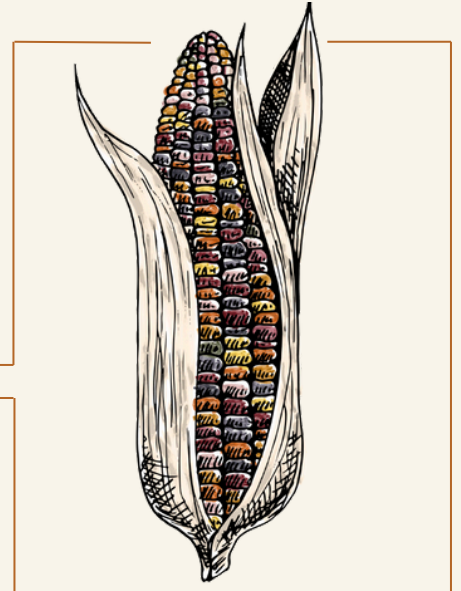
Ojibwe Name: Mandaamin

Taino Name: Maiz, Maize

Other:

INTRODUCTION

Corn is a tall, annual grass that grows between 5 and 12 feet high. It has long, slender leaves and produces ears covered in rows of kernels. Each ear is wrapped in a protective husk. The kernels can come in many colors, including yellow, white, red, blue, and multicolored varieties. Corn is one of the most important crops cultivated by Indigenous peoples, including the Dakota and Ojibwe, for food, trade, and cultural practices. Although maize is Indigenous to Turtle Island, it is now grown and eaten worldwide.



ECOLOGY

Corn thrives in warm climates with plenty of sunlight and well-drained soil. It is typically planted in the spring and harvested in late summer to early fall. Indigenous agricultural traditions often include the "Three Sisters" method, where corn is planted alongside beans and squash. The beans fix nitrogen in the soil, benefiting corn growth, while the squash provides ground cover to retain moisture and suppress weeds. Corn also plays an essential role in ecosystems by providing food and shelter for birds, insects, and small mammals.



Indigenous peoples have cultivated corn for thousands of years. The Dakota, Ojibwe, and many other Indigenous nations developed diverse corn varieties suited to their climates and needs. Corn is a vital food source, trade commodity, and symbol of life and abundance. Today, Indigenous seed keepers and farmers continue to grow traditional corn varieties, preserving ancestral knowledge and strengthening cultural connections to the land.



TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Corn is a staple food and is highly culturally significant to tribal nations throughout Turtle Island. It is a prominent ingredient in ceremonies, stories, songs, and dances. Corn silk tea is an amazing traditional medicine used for urinary tract health, as a diuretic, and for kidney and bladder issues. Ground maize and maize pollen are used in poultices to treat various skin conditions, including eczema. A decoction of the leaves is effective in treating kidney and gallstones. Traditional varieties of corn are rich in complex carbohydrates, fiber, and essential vitamins such as B-complex vitamins. It provides minerals like magnesium and phosphorus and contains antioxidants such as lutein. The nutrient content varies depending on the variety and processing method. Nixtamalized corn, hominy, has much more bioavailable nutrients than unprocessed corn.

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FORAGING AND HARVESTING



Unlike wild plants, corn is cultivated and harvested by farmers and growers. Harvesting times depend on the variety: sweet corn is picked while the kernels are still soft and juicy, while flint, dent, popcorn, and flour corns are left to dry on the stalk before storage. Many Indigenous harvesters make offerings (tobacco, songs, prayers, etc.) to thank the land before gathering corn, honoring the plant's role in sustaining life.

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PRESERVATION

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Corn must be dried, frozen, fermented, or canned for long-term storage. The husks were often braided together with whole cobs and left to dry until needed. Dried maize may be ground into a meal, flour, or nixtamalized to make masa and tortillas. Nixtamalization is a process in which maize is boiled in a mixture of wood ash or lime in water. This breaks down the seed coat, making the corn's nutrients more bioavailable and easier to digest. Fresh corn should be refrigerated and used within a few days. Dried corn products should be stored in airtight containers in a cool, dry place. Proper storage ensures that seeds remain viable for planting in the next growing season.



COMMON THREATS

Corn is susceptible to pests such as corn borers, cutworms, and aphids. Traditional Indigenous farming techniques, such as companion planting and crop rotation, help manage pest populations naturally. Birds and small mammals may also eat corn kernels, but some Indigenous farmers use scarecrows or natural deterrents to protect their crops. Fungal diseases like smut can affect corn, but in some cultures, corn smut (huitlacoche) is considered a delicacy and is harvested as food.



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CULINARY USES

Corn is a versatile ingredient in fresh, dried, or processed forms. It is the base for staple foods like tortillas, tamales, wasna (pemmican), and mush. Maize is also used in all kinds of soups and stews. Maize categories such as flint, flour, sweet, and popcorn come in many varieties, and all differ significantly in appearance, flavor, texture, and even aroma. Cooking techniques are boiling, roasting, grinding (cornmeal and masa are ground from hominy, and arepa is ground dried corn), popping (popcorn), and fermenting (chicha, nixtamalization for tortillas). See the supplemental page for more information on the different corn varieties.

CORN VARIETIES

FLINT CORN

Known for its hard kernels and colorful variations, flint corn is often ground into cornmeal or flour. It's prized for its robustness in colder climates. Culinary uses include making polenta, tamales, and masa for tortillas. Medicinally, it has been used in teas and poultices for its anti-inflammatory properties.

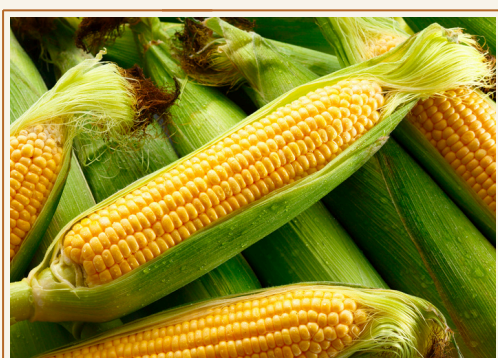


FLOUR CORN

With soft, starchy kernels, flour corn is easily ground into fine flour. It is ideal for baking and making soft breads, muffins, and cakes. It is also used to thicken soups and sauces. This corn is generally milder in flavor, and while its medicinal uses aren't as widespread, it has been consumed for its ease of digestion.

DENT CORN

Characterized by a noticeable indentation (dent) on the crown of each kernel, dent corn is a staple for animal feed and human consumption in processed forms like hominy or masa for tortillas. It's less sweet than other types and can be used to make cornmeal, chips, and various dishes. Medicinally, it's been used in poultices and as a digestive aid. Some Indigenous people classify dent corn as a type of flint corn.



SWEET CORN

Sweet corn is basically immature corn harvested at the "milk stage" before the sugars have been converted to starch. The milky stage refers to the milky white fluid in the young kernels. Known for its tender, juicy kernels, sweet corn is often eaten fresh or preserved by freezing, canning, or drying. It's a common ingredient in soups, salads, and salsas and is also enjoyed grilled or boiled.

POPCORN CORN

This variety is specially cultivated for its ability to pop when heated, creating a light, fluffy snack. Popcorn is rich in fiber and antioxidants, making it a popular healthy snack choice. Medicinally, it's sometimes used in traditional practices to cleanse the digestive system due to its high fiber content.

