

A Multitude of Gratitude

Overview: Throughout history, people have expressed gratitude for their food in a variety of ways. From annual harvest celebrations to simple words of thanks before a meal, recognizing the bounty of the land obtained through the generosity of nature and the hard work of the people involved in growing our food is a tradition found in all cultures. This lesson will encourage students to explore the different ways people in their community and around the world give thanks for their food.



Grade Level/Range: 3rd–6th Grade

Objective: Students will research ways people in the past and present demonstrate appreciation for their food.

Time: 1 hour

Materials:

- Internet or library access
- Paper and pencils
- Assorted craft supplies for posters or computers to make slide show presentations

Background Information

Since ancient times, every society we know of that has raised its own food has had at least one important ceremony or ritual celebrating plentiful harvests. People were keenly aware that food equaled survival and understood the need for a generous store of edible supplies to make it through a cold or a dry season. Harvest festivals often reflected the primary crops that sustained the people and, in most cases, the spiritual beliefs of the society they lived in. People sometimes offered parts of the harvest to their gods as a way to say thanks and ensure future harvests. Some cultures feared that if gods got angry, they might harm the crops. The solution? Offer the deities special sacrifices to avoid offending them.

Harvest traditions varied (and still do), but they shared some common themes. After working long hours, people celebrated the fruits of their labors with feasts, dances, stories, games, and events. Many of these historic festivals are still celebrated today in original or modified forms. Here are a few examples:

- In Ghana, a tradition called Homowo (which translates to “To Hoot at Hunger”) was started as a way to celebrate the end of a period of famine.
- In parts of India, the 10-day Onam Festival in the fall features flowers adorning every home along with a wide variety of events. The Pongal Festival is celebrated in southern India when people celebrate the harvest of crops such as rice, sugar cane, and turmeric.
- In Israel, the Jewish Harvest festival is known as Sukkot. This is the day for remembering the journey of the Jews, who lived in makeshift desert shelters as they traveled. Today, families put up stick huts in gardens, hang fruits and vegetables inside, and gather in them to eat their meals.
- The Korean harvest festival called Chusok features special cakes made of rice, beans, sesame seeds, and chestnuts. Families visit their ancestors’ tombs and honor them with offerings of rice and fruits. Children dress up in traditional clothing and dance, play games, and sing songs.
- In the United States, some people of African descent celebrate Kwanzaa (meaning ‘first fruits’), whose origins are based on African harvest festivals.

These represent just a handful of examples and there are many, many more harvest festivals on the calendar with local, regional and national significance. In addition to these more elaborate celebrations, many cultures also incorporate simple words of thanks before meals. Often called a grace, a blessing or a prayer these moments are meant to provide regular acknowledgement of the work and resources behind delivering food to our tables and encourage mindfulness in knowing the impact food has on our lives.

Laying the Groundwork

Identify an annual harvest festival important in your area. Learn about its history and ask students to share any personal experiences they may have. If possible, search for primary sources for your students to explore, such as old newspaper clippings. Discover why the event was started and its significance in your community. Discuss how the celebration ties in with expressing gratitude.

Exploration

1. Using your research from the Laying the Groundwork as an example, ask students to select another harvest celebration or festival to explore. They can choose another celebration held locally or dig in to traditions from another region or even another country. They can use Internet or book resources. If possible, encourage them to seek out a member of a community that celebrates their chosen celebration to interview.

Questions you can encourage them to answer include:

- What foods are featured or celebrated?
 - What rituals (e.g. dancing, singing, parades) are performed?
 - What can we learn from these about a group's history, values, and relationship to food and farming?
2. Once they have finished their research, ask students to create a short poster board or slide show presentation all about their chosen event. Hold a Celebration of Celebrations to allow them to showcase what they discovered. If time and resources permit, encourage students to add features to their presentations, such as traditional foods for taste testing, decorations, or costumes.
 3. Conclude by discussing what the featured celebrations/festivals have in common and how they are unique. Discuss how they allow people to feel and express their gratitude.

Making Connections

Create your own harvest festival for your school garden or a local community garden. Begin by identifying the harvest item or items you want to spotlight and the goal for the celebration. From there, brainstorm activities and other features to include in your event.

Branching Out

Thanksgiving is one of the most commonly observed harvest festivals in the United States, however the history around it has been simplified and one-sided. The Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian has written and compiled a number of resources to help you explore Thanksgiving with your students with a goal of obtaining a more holistic understanding of this historical event and holiday: <https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/informational/rethinking-thanksgiving>.