INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing emphasis among nutrition educators on the healthful and sustainable properties of consuming locally and regionally grown foods. This nutrition education lesson plan introduces healthful Native American and regional foods to children in grades 4-6 as part of an American history or social studies unit. The purpose of the lesson is for children to understand the importance of continuing our culinary heritage by consuming healthful native and regional foods that sustained our Native American and Pilgrim ancestors for many generations.

OBJECTIVES

Four key learning objectives were developed for this lesson to impart to students an understanding of the history of native foods and their healthful properties, as outlined in Table 1. Because of the growing popularity of Farmer’s Markets and emphasis on regional cuisines, children are becoming increasingly familiar with some of their local native foods. In the first part of this lesson, children discuss that native plants and foods are those that are original or grown and produced by nature in a region. Older children may understand the term native as being synonymous with indigenous which also means that a food is both locally grown and original to a region (1).

Children really enjoy seeing, feeling and tasting native foods, which are often available for purchase at local grocery or natural food stores. Many native foods readily available for purchase include corn, beans, wild rice, winter or summer squash and chiles (fresh or dried). Providing these as part of the lesson enables students to see and touch and fully understand the types of foods. Heirloom beans such as the Anasazi or tepary beans can be purchased from sources on the internet such as Native Seeds/SEARCH
(www.nativeseeds.org) or Indian Harvest (www.indianharvest.com) and simply prepared for tasting and discussion in the classroom (2). Wild rice can be found in most grocery stores and children enjoy eating it when cooked with brown or white rice in a 1:4 or 1:3 ratio.

Two signature pieces in the program, the Columbian Food Exchange (Figure 1) and the Story of the First Thanksgiving, were created to enhance learning about the history of healthful Native American foods (3). Both items can be downloaded from the author’s web site, www.csus.edu/indiv/a/algerts. It is particularly fun to teach this unit in fall, close to the Thanksgiving holiday, when students can compare their family Thanksgiving foods to those described in the Story of the First Thanksgiving. The lesson can be implemented in one full one hour session or broken up into two one half hour modules based on the defining and seeing native foods and discussing their origin to North America via the Columbian exchange. Lesson two would be based on a discussion of native Thanksgiving foods and the health giving properties of native foods.

Traditional Native American foods from different regions of the United States remain a substantial part of today’s diet. Corn, squash, beans and various kinds of berries and nuts are just a few foods that Native Americans introduced to European explorers in 1492 who, in turn, transported them back to the Eastern Hemisphere as part of the Columbian Exchange (4). Foods, animals and people also traveled from the Eastern to the Western hemisphere and transformed the lives of Native Americans, but it was really native foods such as corn, turkey, cranberries and sweet potatoes that sustained the Pilgrims and were served at the first Thanksgiving meal in 1621. The Pilgrims entertained 92 Native
American guests including Squanto and Chief Massasoit to a healthy, balanced feast that provided a diet consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans including lean protein, complex carbohydrate and an abundance of vitamins and minerals (5). Native foods promoted health and prevented disease in our Native American as well as Pilgrim ancestors. Video and print materials on the healthful properties of native foods of the Southwest that can be used in as support or further discussion of the part of this lesson can be obtained from a non-profit organization working to prevent diabetes in Native Americans, Native Seed/SEARCH, cited previously (6). Using the examples of traditional Thanksgiving foods and native southwest foods of the deserts, students can discuss how unprocessed native foods that are low in sugar and fat and provide healthful carbohydrates and important vitamins and minerals are an important part of our American heritage.

EVALUATION

This program has been evaluated by teachers four times in each of the three grade levels, 4-6, with all 12 teachers rating the ability of the program to meet objectives as excellent. Pre and post tests of over 100 students were administered and scored by the author and indicated a 75% increase in the number of children who were accurately able to define a native food and provide examples. There was a 70% increase in pre and post test scores in children being able to identify the healthful properties of native American foods. The program has been modified using feedback from the elementary school teachers and students. Materials for the Healthy Native American Foods Educational Program for Elementary School Children are available on the web site cited previously or by contacting the author at the listed address.
Table 1. Healthy Native American Foods Program Objectives

1. Define and identify a variety of Native American foods.

2. Define the Columbian Exchange and identify foods that moved between the Western and Eastern Hemispheres.

3. Compare/contrast native foods served at the first Thanksgiving with contemporary Thanksgiving foods.

4. State reasons why native foods are healthful and enjoy tasting native foods.

References:


2. Sources of heirloom beans on the internet: Native Seeds/SEARCH (www.nativeseeds.org); Indian Harvest (www.indianharvest.com); The Bean Bag: (www.beanbag.net).


Figure 1. Excerpt from graphic depicting the Columbian Exchange which can be downloaded from the website, www.csus.edu/indiv/a/algerts.