

# Spanning the Gap

## Corn: An American Native



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*Spanning the Gap*  
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by Larry Hilaire

Corn originated in the Americas. In the autumn, we see a type of corn called "Indian corn" but really *all* corn -- some 250 kinds of it -- is "Indian."

Called *maize* in many languages, corn was first cultivated in the area of Mexico more than 7,000 years ago, and spread throughout North and South America. Native Americans probably bred the first corn from wild grasses, and crossed high-yielding plants to make hybrids. At the right are three varieties of Lenape corn: Delaware "black" (or blue) corn, Grandmother corn, and white flour corn. Old varieties of corn typically had small ears, with 8 or 10 rows.

Native Americans, including the Lenape of the Delaware Valley, used corn for many types of food. The foods which we know were derived from corn in the Iroquois nations include dumplings, tamales, hominy, and a ceremonial "wedding cake" bread.

Today, corn has become the most widely grown crop in the western hemisphere. It is a staple in Latin American diets, and in the United States alone, corn has given rise to regional specialties as grits, hush puppies, ashcakes, dodgers, muffins, cracklin' bread, johnny cakes, and corn pone. (The word *pone* is derived from an Algonquian word, and is related to the Delaware word for "baked," *apan*.)

Native Americans also used corn for other purposes, such as mattresses, containers, and toys.



(Left) Delaware "black" (or blue) corn  
(Middle) Grandmother corn.  
(Right) White flour corn  
(NPS Photo by Larry Hilaire)



Native American planting  
(Sketch courtesy of John Kraft).

This last use continues in the valley to this day in the making of corn husk dolls, a favorite autumn activity at Millbrook Village's annual *Octivities* day. In fact, in North America, only 15% of the corn harvest is eaten by humans. The remainder feeds livestock or is used for products such as paper and gunpowder.

Native Americans planted corn, beans, and squash together to form a *Three Sisters Garden*. The name recalls their legend of the "ones who sustain us," three sisters living together in the fields. " Interplanted " gardens such as this have ecological advantages that one-crop fields do not: soil regeneration, varied nutrition, and resistance to plant pests and disease. These benefits look increasingly attractive as we strive to feed our crowded world today.

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Cornfield on the Shapanack Flats NJ, an area farmed by Europeans since the 1600s.



Corn husk doll and a Halloween friend at Millbrook Village's *Octivities* Day.