



A Brief History of Corn



Teosinte

Corn was first domesticated in Mesoamerica around 10,000 years ago. Its earliest ancestor is a grassy plant called teosinte. This wild grass is a far cry from modern-day corn. Teosinte is characterized as being approximately three inches tall and has between five and twelve “tooth-crackingly” hard kernels. Compared to modern day corn, which can have 600-800 kernels, it’s no wonder botanists originally didn’t believe the two were related! Over many generations, early Mesoamericans selectively bred for longer ears and softer kernels, thus giving us the soft, golden ears of corn we know today.

Photo courtesy of Matt Lavin
https://www.flickr.com/photos/plant_diversity/4055517697

Implications of Early Agriculture



Agriculture meant laying down roots! The planting of crops and raising cattle is known as domestication. It was an end to the hunter-gatherer lifestyle and a beginning to sedentary life.



Native communities had to stay in one place to plant, grow, and harvest crops. They began to build permanent dwellings and form villages.



By settling in permanent areas, this led to the idea of “personal property.” People were willing to defend this property from attacks by those who wanted to take it.



What are other consequences of early agriculture and domestication?



Blood and Corn

One of the most important civilizations in Mesoamerica, the Mayans, were very dependent on corn.

Based on isotopic analysis of skeletal remains, 70% of their diet was corn-based!

In fact, according to the Mayan creation legend, the Gods formed the Mayans from a dough made of corn and blood.



Corn Goes Global!

From Mesoamerica, corn was brought north to present-day America. In fact, the Southwest was the first place where corn agriculture began in America. This was in present-day Arizona and New Mexico.

From there, corn was brought through America by the Native Americans. When European colonists arrived, the Native Americans taught them how to grow corn, an act that was vital to successful colonization efforts.

After learning how to grow corn, Christopher Columbus and other explorers introduced corn to Europe. Because of this, corn plants mature somewhere in the world nearly every month of the year and corn has become the most important crop in the United States!



"John Smith trying to get more food for the settlers." Photo courtesy of National Park Service



"Interview of Samoset with the Pilgrims." Book Engraving. 1853.