

# Thanksgiving: A Forest Feast

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Forests have been, and remain, a critical cultural and economic foundation for this nation. Our close relationship with the forests that surround us can be demonstrated by the struggle and success of early European settlers. Thanksgiving is a holiday celebrating survival in a new land. One aspect of this holiday, sometimes forgotten, is the role of the forest.

Foraging for food in a forest is a fun adventure for youth groups and hikers. Living "off the land" remains a romantic notion many people have of wild places and the deep woods. Have you ever tried to forage for food in a strange winter forest? There is plenty of food in a forest at various times of the year. Winter is not an ideal time for recreational forest grazing or starting a new life.

The history of Thanksgiving in the New World started with a winter forest along the ocean shore in the Cape Cod area of Massachusetts. The Mayflower dropped anchor on November 21, 1620. The boat was filled with separatists from the Church of England and other travelers that had left England more than two months before. It was not a good trip across the North Atlantic in October. On December 26, 1620, after exploring the area, the boat was moved to the site that would be New Plymouth.

The winter of 1620-1621 was mild for the area. Half of the people died by April. A rough boat crossing and a new land in winter took a heavy toll. Keeping warm and having something (anything) to eat were the prime means of surviving. The ship's stores, decreased by two months of ocean voyage, and with no fresh or unfrozen items, provided some calories. Walking into the woods provided a few more. The first meals from the New World forests included any small (or large) game that could be killed. Also gathered from the surrounding woods were acorns, chestnuts, hazelnuts, hickory nuts, beechnuts, and other assorted fruits and nuts from forest trees.

The American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*) grew in scattered areas on the land-side of Cape Cod at that time. Chestnut made up a large share of the forests that grew in the upland areas back from the main coast about 20 miles. Chestnut trees were wiped-out in the early 20th century from a fungal disease. At the time of the Mayflower, chestnuts were available for gathering through the snow. Chestnuts are one of the world's perfect foods. All the essential elements needed for human life are contained inside the nuts within the sharp and spiny husk. Chestnuts and water could keep a person alive.

Hickory nuts (*Carya* sp.) were also present in the surrounding forest. Although hard to crack, the nut meats were sweet and nutritious. Several smaller nut trees were also present. The hophornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*) and hornbeam (*Carpinus caroliniana*) with tiny nutlets could be found. Hazel (*Corylus* sp.) with a delicious nut were scattered throughout the understory of the forest. American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) provided beechnuts. The forest was filled with food if you knew what to look for.

The people of the Mayflower were not botanists and did not know what to expect. The red fruit of the dogwoods (*Cornus florida*) looked similar to the delicious dogwood fruits of Europe but proved tasteless and bad. Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) and poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*), two

species with white berries in winter-time, did not grow in Europe. These woodland plants were a nasty surprise.

There were also many competitors for food in the winter forests of Massachusetts. Today a person must be quick and lucky to beat squirrels, turkeys, bear, deer, and other assorted animals to fruit and nuts. In the middle of winter in a strange landscape around New Plymouth, the animal competition for forest foods was severe, but these competitors were elusive.

Another forest food was acorns. Acorns contain a rich supply of fats and proteins. The local white (*Quercus alba*), swamp white (*Quercus bicolor*), post (*Quercus stellata*), and chestnut oaks (*Quercus prinus*) all produced acorns that were edible with only minor preparation. The native scarlet (*Quercus coccinea*), red (*Quercus rubra*), black (*Quercus velutina*), and bear (*Quercus ilicifolia*) oaks produced acorns that kept well, but needed to be soaked in fresh water for a long time to remove the bitter tannins. Small amounts of white-oak-group acorns could be eaten raw, roasted, or ground. A warm acorn gruel or mush was common among the native Americans in the area.

Removing the bitter, indigestible tannins from acorns to make them edible required water. Shelled and ground acorns could be soaked in running water for a couple of days. Whole acorns could be shelled and buried in a wet sandbar by a stream. In a couple of months the acorns would have turned black in color but would be sweet to eat. Stealing acorn collections from animals, and stumbling upon stream-side soaking sinks provided food for another day.

The harshness of winter in a Massachusetts forest is hard to comprehend today. With the technology of the 1620's, anyone surviving the first few years is surprising. The bleakness of the first sight of land was soon replaced by a knowing richness of the woods and the land. The holiday of Thanksgiving is about the tenacity of the human spirit and a bountiful, forested landscape.

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