

Thanksgiving and The Roots of Current Agricultural Practices

Mir-M Seyedbagheri, Professor Emeritus

Thanksgiving. It's a time to reflect on our families, our friends, and our good fortune, while consuming rich foods. That bountiful repast we enjoy is thanks to the assiduous efforts of our farmers nationwide. While their labors have been constant, the practices employed have evolved over time. According to an article in Forbes, "knowledge sharing and the application of new technologies have helped transform food production in this country to be one of the more efficient and abundant in the world."

When one thinks of Thanksgiving and agriculture, one might think of Pilgrims and Squanto, the Native American, who taught the Pilgrims the tenets of cultivating crops. In particular, he showed the new colonists how to plant corn and fertilize crops using fish. A particular method employed by Native Americans at the time was called "Three Sisters Garden." This included corn, beans, and squash planted in a companion garden. Fish were frequently buried under corn rows. Beans were planted alongside the corn to "grow up the stalks as a trellis." Squash were buried so that the leaves covered the soil, akin to a mulch.

This particular garden offered a number of benefits. In particular, it provided colonists a hearty, healthy, and storable meal. The garden also exemplified the efficiency of crops grown together or in successive order. This method resulted in benefits very similar to modern-day crop rotations.

We should never lose sight of the original "Three Sisters" method. Many of our current practices owe so much to it. In particular, corn maintains its prominence as a staple crop, both for nutritional purposes and an array of others. In addition, conservation tillage for weed control is also rooted in the "Three Sisters" method.

Under the original method, squash leaves shaded the soil around bean and corn crops. This prevented weeds from flourishing and taking root. Many farmers employ this method today. Conservation tillage offers a multitude of benefits, including reducing the need for pesticide application, retaining soil moisture, averting runoff, as well as enhancing soil health and overall biodiversity.

As we sit down to partake on Thanksgiving, let us pay tribute to the ingenuity of agricultural pioneers and practices. The efficiency of agricultural production reflects an ever-evolving technology. Such advances include the combustion engine and mechanical harvesting, followed by modern crop protection products and seed breeding technologies. These latter advances, in particular, have contributed to present levels of efficiency.

However, even as we move into the future, there is much to be learned from our past. It is important to maintain a spirit of ingenuity and creativity going forward, for this is what has made America and American agriculture the envy of the world.

Happy Thanksgiving and God bless you all.