



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

The Edible Plants of Thanksgiving!

My New England grandmother put on a classic Norman Rockwell Thanksgiving dinner each year. Many of you could probably recite the menu, and it never varied. Oh, at one point she added mashed turnips to the fare, because my father's mother had told her that my father loved them. This was patently untrue, and neither did anyone else, but there were some things you just didn't tell Grandma. So year after year the dish of lovingly mashed and buttered turnips sat untouched. But now I have a son who loves braised turnips with the holiday meal.

The modern menu has become a mix of foods from around the world. But it is still heavy on the fruit, roots, and grains of our American natives—albeit eastern natives and plants originally domesticated from central and South America. Cranberry sauce, succotash, the starchy side dishes and pies all have American origins. Some of the plants can be grown here; others have special requirements that would make it difficult.

I have a vivid memory of a rather tense discussion between my father and grandfather about the origins of that hard, candied fruit that sticks in your teeth when you eat fruitcake. One said it was a citrus, the other said it was a melon. These were two proud and very smart men, each sure of his position. The oldest child was eventually dispatched upstairs to look it up in the encyclopedia. The answer is at the end.

So to help your family resolve these factual disputes, here is some basic information about the Thanksgiving comestibles. For the turkey, you're on your own. I can suggest a local source....

Vegetable sticks:

Carrot -- *Daucus carota sativa*, and celery -- *Apium graveolens dulce*.

These are cool season annuals; celery is from Europe and Asia, and carrots are probably from Afghanistan.

Family: Apiaceae (or Umbelliferae; parsley family)

Both are planted in early fall for winter and spring crops. Celery is surprisingly easy to grow, but a little tricky to blanch for the pale stalks you see in the store. So garden celery is green and has strong flavor. Carrots require loose soil or the roots will be misshapen, and the seed takes a long time to germinate. So it is often planted together with:

Radishes -- *Raphanus sativus*

From the Mediterranean.

Family: Brassicaceae (mustard). Radish seeds germinate in days, and are ready to harvest in 3 – 6 weeks. Planted in fall or early spring in loose soil. The carrot seeds will just be sprouting as you pull the radishes.

Olives -- *Olea europea*

Small tree, grown in full sun. Easy, ornamental, drought tolerant. Common allergy plant. From: Mediterranean.



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Family: Oleaceae. Soaked in water, brine or lye to remove the bitter glucosides. Usually cured from green olives in California, then some are processed by bubbling air through the solution to make them turn black. Black (ripe) fruit are used for Italian and Greek-style olives.

Side dishes:

Cranberries -- *Vaccinium macrocarpon*

Low ground covering shrub, needs very moist, acidic soil. Grown in bogs for ease of harvest (just beat the bushes, float off the berries). Most common species is from Northeastern U. S. and Canada.

Family: Ericaceae (Heather family). You can't grow them here. They need highly-organic soil with very low pH. Full of anti-oxidants, great for the urinary tract.

Potatoes -- *Solanum tuberosum*

Tuber-forming tender perennial grown as annual.

Family: Solanaceae (nightshade)

Easy to grow in loose soil (add compost), planted anytime spring to summer. Potatoes from your garden are much sweeter than store-bought. From the Andes.

Sweet potatoes -- *Ipomoea batatas*

Tuber-forming tender perennial, grown as annual.

Family: Convolvulaceae (morning glory).

Needs a very long warm season. Plant in loose soil in late spring. The vines scramble all over everything; give them plenty of room. From the American tropics.

The red Sweet potato is commonly called 'yam', which is also the common name of *Dioscorea*, a starchy tuberous perennial grown in tropical Africa and Asia (too tender to grow here).

Corn – *Zea mays*

Annual grass grown in the summer. From Mesoamerica.

Family: Poaceae (grasses). Plant from mid-spring to mid-summer. Sweet corn was a spontaneous mutation from field corn in the 19th Century, meaning that the colonists ate, um, field corn. Flavorful, but chewy.

Often mixed with:

Lima beans – *Phaseolus limensis*

Summer annual. From Andes and Mesoamerica.

Family: Fabaceae (or Leguminosae).

Plant late spring to mid-summer; the later plantings will give you a fall crop for your holiday table. Corn and Lima beans, seasoned with a little onion and salt, are combined to make succotash. Yankees apparently add bacon and tomatoes. Some people add cream, and Midwesterners probably add cream of mushroom soup, sprinkle with crumbs, and bake it. All just attempts at disguising the fact that you're serving lima beans.

Pearl onions – *Allium cepa*



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Bulb-forming perennials. Origin of onions is unknown; among the earliest cultivated plants.

Family: Amaryllidaceae (amaryllis)

White, yellow, or red onions are planted at very high density to produce very small (pearl) or small (boiler) bulbs. You can do this yourself by planting a bunch of seed in a pot in a sunny spot in the spring, and thin them (use the thinnings like scallions) to about 2 inches apart. They'll bulb up in the late summer.

Stuffing.

My grandmother never made any other stuffing than that which is made with cubed bread (and being from Boston, she called it 'dressing'). The seasoning that makes this old-fashioned recipe distinctive is crumbled dried sage leaves, presumably imported by the colonists at great expense from the mother country.

Garden sage – *Salvia officinalis*

Small shrub to 3', with attractive grayish leaves, some forms with purple or creamy variegation. From the Mediterranean.

Family: Lamiaceae (or Labiatae: mint family)

Loves heat; drought-tolerant. Very easy to grow. Fresh chopped leaves are more pungent. I'm told that in some families stuffing for the bird can be made from other things such as corn bread, and that exotic ingredients might include wild rice, or nuts such as pecans, filberts, or pinenuts! Imagine.

Wild Rice – *Zizania palustris*

Annual grass native and cultivated in the northern Midwestern states, harvested by native Americans in the eastern US and Canada. Not related to the rice from Asia (*Oryza*), but some rice farmers in California cultivate *Zizania*.

Filberts – *Corylus avellana*, *C. maxima*

Small trees grown in Oregon. Not tolerant of hot, dry climates.

Pinenuts – edible nuts are harvested from at least 17 species of *Pinus*, including 8 American natives. Most common: *Pinus monophylla* and *P. edulis*, the pinyons harvested by Native Americans in the west. Very slow-growing, not common in the trade. *Pinus pinea*, the Italian stone pine. Broad-spreading, huge tree too large for most yards.

Dessert:

Pecan – *Carya illinoensis*

Hardy, large deciduous tree. From south and central U.S.

Family: Juglandaceae (walnut). Fast-growing upright trees to 40 feet tall or more. Need careful training for good branch structure. Aphids cause honeydew drip in late summer. Probably best for rural properties.

Pumpkin – *Cucurbita pepo pepo*

Annual vine grown in the summer. From South America.



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Family: Cucurbitaceae (gourd family). Plant May – July in full sun, water deeply and regularly; give plenty of room! Use varieties bred for pie filling (usually just called 'Sugar' or 'Pie'), as they have a denser texture and better flavor than jack-o-lantern varieties.

And of course, the whole meal depends on:

Sugar!

Sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*) is a giant grass grown in tropical areas. There is a variety that is hardy enough to grow in Northern California; it's a huge clump-forming grass to 8 feet tall with plumes standing a few feet above the foliage. The leaves have very sharp edges.

Sugar beet (*Beta vulgaris*) is a cool season biennial with 12 – 20% sugar content in the tubers, formerly an important crop in Yolo and Solano counties.

So what did my brother find when he looked up Citron? He came back down with a broad smile: citron is made from the candied peel of BOTH a citrus and a melon.

Citron – *Citrus medica*

Subtropical tree, among the more tender citrus, but can be grown here with winter protection.

From the Mediterranean.

Family: Rutaceae. You can grow the Etrog citron for candying, or the Buddha's Hand citron for the fragrant and ornamental fruit. Both are on the tender side; plant near the house or plan to protect them from freezing weather.

For citron, the peel is fermented, then candied to become that hard chewy stuff in fruitcake, but it is expensive. So much of the colored stuff you see in fruitcake is:

Citron melon – *Citrullus vulgaris*

Annual vine, grown in the summer. From North Africa.

Family: Cucurbitaceae. Plant April – June in full sun, water deeply, give plenty of room. Can reseed to become a weed. A small, white-fleshed watermelon with thick rind, which is the part that is candied for fruitcake.

So they were both right, and we all gave thanks for that.

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Pecans grow well here, but with limitations. They aren't a commercial crop because of the uneven yields and late harvest. Mine begin to drop in November, just in time for pie. For home gardeners, keep in mind that the trees are very large, need careful training for good branch structure, and late-summer aphids can cause honeydew drip. Good drought tolerance. Some varieties require cross-pollination. Western Schley is a widely adapted self-fruitful variety.



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Some pumpkins are ornamental as well as great for cooking. Fairytale is a lovely productive variety that yields 2 to 3 large pumpkins per vine. The dense flesh is great for pies.



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Salvia officinalis

Garden sage is the distinctive seasoning in traditional American stuffing for birds. It's a very easy garden plant that loves full sun and tolerates drought. The shrub gets 3 to 4 feet across and can be long-lived.



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Sugarcane

There is a variety of sugar cane that can be grown in our region. The flower plumes are interesting and dramatic, but it's a very big plant, resembling pampas grass in size (with similar sharp leaf-edges).