

Maize and the Maya/The Course of Corn

Grade 5

Extension

Fall

These worksheets are designed for use in the fall, when students can go to the garden to observe and investigate corn. The objective is to give students first-hand experience with corn--one of the world's most important food--which was first domesticated thousands of years ago by the peoples of Central and South America. As they think about how the ancient Maya supplied themselves with food, students may also consider the question: Where does our food come from?

Many teachers find it's best to work with smaller groups in the garden. If so, half the class can work inside on the Maize & the Maya worksheet, while the other half makes observations outside using the Course of Corn worksheet; then the two groups switch. If your school has a late crop of corn that is still forming ears in September, students can use the Course of Corn worksheet over several weeks to track the ears' growth and maturation.

When using the Course of Corn worksheet, teacher or students should choose a particular corn plant to focus on, ideally one on which the ear has not formed. Mark the stalk with red yarn or some other label to be able to identify the plant in subsequent observations.

MAIZE and the MAYA

Maize is a New World plant; originally it grew ONLY in central America. Like many Mesoamerican cultures before them, the Maya civilization was built on maize.

Maize was the Mayas' most important crop. They ate maize at every meal. Farmers, who made up most of the population, grew maize for their own families but also for the priests and nobility. They had advanced planting techniques, each suited to the climate and soil of a particular area. In the jungles, farmers used a slash and burn method. With only stone axes and fire, they were able to cut down and burn trees and dense brush to clear a milpa (field) where maize could grow. The leftover ashes improved the poor soil. After a few years of farming, the soil would be worn out; so farmers would abandon the milpa and clear new fields. In hilly places, farmers built terraces—steps in the hillsides, which made a level growing area and kept the soil from washing away. In swampy areas, they dug up nutrient-rich soil from the wetlands to make raised beds. If they were farming in dry areas, they collected water in cenotes (natural or manmade wells).

The Maya believed maize was a gift from the gods and that the gods controlled the fate of their fields. They sacrificed to the gods to insure a good crop.

Maize plays an important role in the Maya creation story. Do you know that story? The gods wanted to create beings to worship them. First they tried to make creatures out of mud, but those melted away. Next they made creatures of wood, but the gods couldn't understand what they said. Those creatures turned into monkeys. At last the gods created creatures from corn flour. The gods were pleased with these creations; they were the first people.

Maize was so important to the Maya, they considered it sacred. Why was maize so special? (Hint: What would happen if the maize crop failed?)

The Maya farmer's life centered around planting, growing, and harvesting maize. All these tasks were accomplished with help from the gods. Maya farmers knew a lot about how to grow maize. What do you know?

Have you seen a corn seed? Yes No

What does a corn seed look like?

Where did a Maya farmer get corn seeds?

What is slash and burn agriculture?

Why did the Maya farm this way? (Write down at least one advantage of this farming method.)

What is a disadvantage of this method?

The Maya ate some form of maize at almost every meal. Maya women used a metate and a mano to grind maize kernels, tools that Maya women still use today.

What is a metate? (Consult a classroom reference if necessary.)



Bonus: Here is a picture of the Maya maize god. One of the Maya's most important gods, he is usually portrayed as young and beautiful, and shown with corn growing from his head. Draw an outline around any corn plants you can find in this image.