






Food and Agriculture in the Ancient Americas

Overview:






Students will learn what crops are native to Mexico, Central America, and South America. They will learn about the agricultural techniques used to grow them and their importance as food in ancient societies.

Objectives:




At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

-  **Identify** crops grown by the Mayan, Aztec, and Incan civilizations and explain the agricultural techniques used to grow the crops.
-  **Explain** how the geographic locations, landforms, and climates of Mexico, Central America, and South America influenced the food and farming of the Mayan, Aztec, and Incan civilizations.
-  **Make connections** between the diets of historic cultures and the foods we eat today.

Materials:

-  A Map of the Americas
-  Handout 1: “The Mayans”
-  Handout 2: “The Aztecs”
-  Handout 3: “The Incans”
-  A terraced garden bed


On the Board:

-  Student Reflection Questions
-  Vocabulary
-  Headings: Mayans, Aztecs, and Incans

Suggested Snack:




-  Popcorn
-  Dark Chocolate
-  Sliced Avocado

Preparation:

-  Review handouts and decide on how you will divide class into three groups.

Vocabulary:

 Mesoamerican
 staple crop

 chinampa
 slash and burn
 terrace

 canal
 native

Learning Activities:

I. Snack (10 min.)

- A. Begin this lesson with the snack. Serve students lightly salted plain popcorn, dark chocolate, and sliced avocado.

- B. Ask students: What do all these foods have in common?
 - They are native to Mexico, Central America, and South America.
 - Tell students that if they came to California two thousand years ago, they would not have been able to find any of these foods.
 - C. Tell students that the ancient civilizations of the Americas used several different agricultural techniques to grow their crops: chinampas, terraces, and canals.
2. Classroom Activity: Ancient Agricultural Techniques in the Americas (25 min.)
- A. Break students into three groups. Tell students that each group will learn about the agricultural practices of one Ancient American civilization: the Mayans, Aztecs, or Incans.
 - B. To each group, distribute one of the three handouts: “The Mayans,” “The Incans,” or “The Aztecs.”
 - Have each group read their handout and prepare to present their findings to the class.
 - Each group should locate where their civilization lived on the world map.
 - They should discuss the major crops grown, the agricultural techniques used, and why.
 - C. Have each group present their findings.
 - D. After students present, distribute handouts so that each student has all three.
3. Garden Demo (10 min.)
- A. Ideally, have a terraced plot in your garden that you can show to the students.
 - B. Ask students:
 - Where is the terraced garden technique the most useful? (On mountainous or hilly areas.)
 - How might an ancient society have gotten water to the top of a terrace? (Snowpack melt, rivers, and springs.)
 - How might they have gotten water to the bottom? (They dug canals that brought water to each terrace along the mountain.)
4. Have students answer the Reflection Questions in their garden journals. (5 min.)

Student Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever seen a terraced garden before? Where? If not, why do you think you have never seen one?
2. Which of the agricultural techniques that you learned about today was most interesting to you? Why?

Assessment Questions:

1. List three ancient American civilizations.
 - The Mayans, Aztecs, and Incans
2. List three agricultural techniques that these civilizations used to grow crops.
 - Terraces
 - Canals
 - Chinampas
 - Slash-and-burn

Standards:

Common Core State Standards

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7

Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

Acknowledgements:

This lesson was adapted from:

Civilizations of the Americas Walk. The Edible Schoolyard.

<https://edibleschoolyard.org/resource/g7-,4-civilizations-americas-walk-esyb>



The Mayans: 2600 BCE - 900 CE

Name: _____

Teacher: _____

Date: _____

The Mayans were an advanced civilization that lived on the Yucatan Peninsula (modern day southern Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize, and Honduras). They were famous for their art, architecture, mathematics, calendar, and astronomical system.

The Mayans were skilled farmers and used their knowledge of calendars and seasonal change to grow food. They lived in the lowlands, which were often dense with trees



Chichen-Itza, a Mayan temple

and had few lakes or streams. In the swampy lowlands, they constructed raised-earth platforms on a lake that drained off extra water to grow more without having to increase the amount of land they used. They also used “slash-and-burn” agriculture, where they would clear land by cutting down vegetation and burning plants and trees. But this technique was very harsh on the land. In the mountains, they used terraces. The Mayans had constant trouble trying to feed their growing population. They grew maize, corn, beans, squash, cacao (chocolate), and chili peppers.

The decline of the Mayans is still a mystery, but might have been caused by drought or famine.



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A Mayan canal



The Aztecs: 1325 CE - 1519 CE

Name: _____

Teacher: _____

Date: _____

The Aztecs lived near modern day Mexico City. Their largest city, Tenochtitlan, means “the place of the fruit of the prickly pear cactus.” As the legend goes, the Aztecs were instructed by their gods to build their city where they saw an eagle standing on a cactus clutching a snake in its talons. This place happened to be on an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco. Because they lived on a lake, and were surrounded by water, the Aztecs built a very sophisticated city. They built aqueducts to store water, drainage systems, paved streets, bridges, and a canal system.



Corn was their staple crop. They used a *metate* (a large stone) to grind the corn into flour to make tortillas. They also grew peppers, tomatoes, sage, cacao (chocolate), squash, green beans, sweet potatoes, and avocados.

The Aztecs were conquered by Hernan Cortez, a Spanish conquistador.



To create more farmland, the Aztecs built *chinampas*, or raised beds that were separated by canals that farmers could move through on canoes. These beds were very fertile and could yield seven crops annually.





The Incans: 1438 CE - 1532 CE

Name: _____

Teacher: _____

Date: _____

The Incan Empire was the largest in Pre-Columbian (before Columbus came to the Americas in 1492) America. It spanned from almost the southern tip of South America, through Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and the northern part of Argentina. According to their legend, the Inca people descended from Inti, the sun god.

The land encompassed many different climates, from rain forest to cloud forest to desert. This meant there were many types of growing zones at different altitudes.

Many Incans lived in the Andes mountain range. They built terraces to adapt to the steep terrain. A terrace is where a piece of sloped land has been cut into a series of flat surfaces or platforms which resemble steps.

This technique is used to farm on hilly or mountainous terrain, as it can help



Terraced land in the ancient city of Machu-Picchu



decrease erosion (when soil, rock or other pieces of land are moved from one place to another by wind or water). Erosion can make it very difficult to grow crops. Their crops were quinoa, corn, and potatoes.

The Incans were conquered by the Spanish.



Map of Ancient Americas





Chinampas

