

## Harvest of the Month: Squash

### 6-8<sup>th</sup> Grade

#### Vocabulary:

- Turkey
- Seed saving
- Navajo Hubbard Squash
- Navajo Cushaw Squash
- Long Walk
- Harvesting
- Tradition

#### *Engage*

- Begin by reading *The Journey of Squash* narrative together as a class.
- Explain to students that this story has been passed down since time immemorial, carrying both the wisdom of agriculture and the power of storytelling. These teachings remind us how food connects people, culture, and survival.
- As students listen, encourage them to write down agriculture key words or ideas that stand out to them. These will be words that capture the heart of the story.

#### *Explore and Explain*

- Activity 1: **Writing Assignment – Tell Your Story:** Storytelling has always been an important part of Native history, helping to pass down lessons, values, and traditions from one generation to the next. Imagine you are a squash seed carried by Turkey in the creation story or saved by Navajo women during the Long Walk. Write a first-person narrative describing your journey, how you grew, and what you mean to those who cared for you.
- Activity 2: **Seed Vault Art Project – Learning from Indigenous Seed Saving**
- Activity 3: **Squash Investigation – Compare and Contrast Chart**

#### *Elaborate*

- Watch the [Squash Harvesting](#) video and take notes on how squash is picked, handled, and stored.
- Think about the differences between summer and winter squash harvesting.
- Reflect on how commercial harvesting differs from traditional practices, like those of the Navajo people, and how each approach affects the plants, seeds, and community.

#### *Evaluate*

- Review your notes from the video, writing assignment, and squash investigation.
- Answer the following questions as a class:
  - How do summer and winter squash differ in growth, harvesting, and storage?
  - Why is seed saving important for both traditional and modern agriculture?
  - How do storytelling and cultural practices help preserve squash varieties and community knowledge?

**Suggested Lesson Activities:**

- Indigenous Vocabulary
- Writing Assignment – Tell Your Story
- Seed Vault Art Project – Learning from Indigenous Seed Saving
- Squash Investigation – Compare and Contrast Chart

**Additional Educator Resources:**

- [USDA Plant Genetic Resources Unit – Squash Production](#)
- [SNAP-Ed Seasonal Produce Guide – Winter Squash](#)
- [Oklahoma State University – Squash and Pumpkin Production](#)
- [American Indian Health & Diet Project – Squash](#)
- [Native Seeds/SEARCH – Southwest Traditional Squash](#)
- [AgMRC – Squash Production](#)
- [346 Million Tons Of Squash Are Harvested In America This Way](#)

## Squash

*Grades 6-8: Please feel free to modify these lessons as needed to meet your students' needs.*

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### The Journey of the Squash

*Nadine Peterson, Freeman Yazzie, and Dorothy Martinez lovingly shared this story with us. We thank them and their families for carrying these memories and teachings forward. Their words remind us that food is not only for the body but also for the heart, the spirit, and the strength of our people.*

Long ago, before this world, Turkey carried a secret. Hidden in its wings were tiny seeds from the Fourth World, called the White World. When Turkey flew into the Glittering World, the world we live in now, it shook its wings. Seeds rained down onto the earth, and from them grew the first squash.



*Figure 1: Insides of the Navajo Hubbard Squash*

This was more than food. Squash was a gift of survival. Its flesh could be cooked and eaten, its seeds saved and replanted, and its shell used for rattles, cups, and tools. Squash nourished not only the body but also the spirit.

Years later, a great hardship came to the Navajo people. In 1863, soldiers forced them from their homeland and marched them hundreds of miles to Fort Sumner in what became known as the Long Walk. Many suffered along the way, and survival seemed uncertain.

But the women remembered the story of Turkey. Just as Turkey once hid seeds, they sewed seeds into their clothes before leaving. At Fort Sumner, they secretly planted them. Though few grew, those plants helped keep families alive. The squash became food and medicine, healing their hunger and giving them the strength to endure.

When the people finally returned home in 1868, they brought their stories and seeds. They planted squash, corn, and beans again. They harvested carefully, saved seeds for the next year, and taught their children and grandchildren how to keep the traditions alive.



*Figure 2: Navajo Hubbard Squash*

Squash became a symbol of resilience. It reminded people that even in the hardest times, the gifts of the earth, if cared for, can help them survive. Families stored squash through the long winters, shared harvests with neighbors, and used it in ceremonies that tied them back to the land and one another.

The Navajo squash, round and strong like a pumpkin, still grows today. It carries a promise made long ago: **“If you take care of me, I will take care of you. I will keep you strong.”**

## Navajo Squash: Growing Strong and Giving Back

Picture long, twisting squash vines stretching across a garden, their colorful fruits spilling over the soil or hanging from their stems. For generations, the Navajo people have cultivated and saved these special squashes, preserving the plants and traditions surrounding them.

Squash begins as a small seed, which grows into a vigorous vine with broad, green leaves. The plant produces bright yellow flowers that rely on bees and other pollinators to reproduce. Squash



*Figure 3: The Navajo Cushaw Squash.*

comes in two main types: summer squash, which is harvested while the skin is still tender, and winter squash, which is left to mature with a hard rind that allows it to be stored for months. Among these many varieties, the Navajo people grow squashes with unique shapes and colors. Navajo Hubbard squash is large and round, sometimes slightly elongated, with skin that ranges from green-blue to dark green, light pink, or orange, and sweet orange flesh inside. Navajo Cushaw squash is recognizable by its long, curved neck and striking green-and-white striped skin, with creamy to light orange flesh. After pollination, the female flowers swell and develop into mature squash that can be harvested when firm. Farmers, gardeners, and the Navajo people have long practiced seed saving, carefully selecting the healthiest and most productive fruits to plant next season and ensuring the survival and improvement of these varieties. Like other squashes, they can be baked, boiled, dried, or added to soups, thriving best in sunny soil with ample water and room to grow.

## From Farm to Table: Squash Across the United States

Squash is an important crop across the United States, grown on large and small farms. American farmers produce hundreds of millions of pounds of squash each year, including zucchini, summer squash, and winter squash. The top squash-producing states include Michigan, California, Florida, New York, and Georgia, where the warm climate, rich soil, and consistent water allow plants to flourish. On large farms, squash is planted in organized rows and carefully tended so that vines can spread, and fruits can reach full size. Smaller family farms and the Navajo people in the Southwest continue to grow traditional varieties like Navajo Hubbard and Cushaw, maintaining cultural and agricultural traditions. By saving seeds and carefully tending their crops, these growers ensure that squash remains a reliable source of food, nutrition, and income. Squash grown in the U.S. feeds families locally and reaches markets and kitchens nationwide, highlighting its ongoing role as both a versatile and historically significant food.



*Figure 4: The insides of the Navajo Cushaw Squash.*





# North American Squash Varieties and Their Origins

Many squash varieties were developed by tribes, and they are often referred to as "heirloom" or "heritage" varieties. Squash was an important part of a special way of planting called the Three Sisters. Native American tribes grew squash, corn, and beans together because they helped each other grow and gave people a healthy mix of food.





# Acoma Pumpkin

Grown by the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico, this is a distinct variety of pumpkin.



## Connecticut Field Pumpkin

This type of pumpkin was cultivated by Native Americans in the Northeast long before European arrival.



# Cushaw

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This large, striped, and often curved squash was grown by many Native American groups, including southern and Southwestern tribes. The Navajo Cushaw is also known as “tail squash.”





# Delicata

Though its precise origins are unclear, the original delicata squash is believed to have been an heirloom variety grown by Native Americans in the U.S.



# Gete Okosomin

## **Gete Okosomin: The “Cool Old Squash”**

The Minom people have been growing this squash for thousands of years. In the Manomi language, its name means “cool old squash” or “big old squash.”

**The Myth:** Some people once believed the seeds were found inside an 800-year-old clay ball during a dig in Wisconsin in 2008. They thought the seeds were planted and grew into squash again.

**The Truth:** That story isn't true. The Miami Nation saved and cared for the seeds for many generations. They ensured the squash stayed strong and healthy by hand-pollinating and saving seeds yearly. In the 1990s, the Miami Nation gave some seeds to a professor at the University of Wisconsin, which helped more people learn about and grow this special squash.







# Hidatsa

This squash variety was developed by the Hidatsa people, a Native American tribe of the Great Plains. The Hidatsa winter squash is an heirloom variety originally cultivated by the Hidatsa people in what is now North Dakota. A type of *Cucurbita maxima*, it is a winter squash known for its sweet, fine-grained, orange flesh and long storage life.



# Long Island Cheese

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Though now known as a Long Island heirloom, this pumpkin-like winter squash is believed to have descended from squashes grown by tribes.





# Seminole Squash/ Seminole Pumpkin

A traditional variety from the Seminole people of Florida. This tan, pear-shaped squash is especially resilient to heat, humidity, and pests.



# Thelma Sanders Sweet Potato Squash

A winter squash heirloom that sets the standard for acorn squash. This variety, along with other winter squashes, was domesticated by Native Americans from indigenous squash types.





# Tohono O'odham Ha:l

This variety is associated with the Tohono O'odham people of the Sonoran Desert.



Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Seed Vault Art Project: Learning from Indigenous Seed Saving

#### Step 1: Watch the Video

- Choose **one of the following videos**:
  1. [Native Seeds SEARCH Conservation Center Garden Tour and Seed Saving](#)
  2. [Pueblo Seed Saving at Flowering Tree Permaculture Institute – Santa Clara Pueblo](#)
- While watching, take notes on:
  - Seed collection, cleaning, and storing.
  - The importance of seed saving for culture, community, and sustainability.
  - Creative strategies for protecting and preserving seeds.

#### Step 2: Design Your Seed Vault

- Using what you learned from the video, design your own **seed-saving vault** that reflects the needs of your community. Think about:
  - The type of seeds most important for your family, neighborhood, or local environment.
  - How your vault will protect seeds from moisture, pests, or other dangers.
  - How it can reflect your tribe, values, or community identity.

#### Step 3: Build and Decorate Your Vault

- Use materials such as cardboard, shoeboxes, clay, paper, or other art supplies to construct your vault.
- Decorate your vault with meaningful symbols, patterns, or images.
- Include several “seeds” in your vault. These can be real seeds, paper cutouts, clay models, or beads. Include the names of each seed.

#### Step 4: Reflection and Sharing

- Present your vault to the class and describe your design choices.

### Activity 3: Squash Investigation – Compare and Contrast Chart

#### Objective:

Students will analyze, organize, and compare the characteristics of summer and winter squash using a structured chart.

#### Materials:

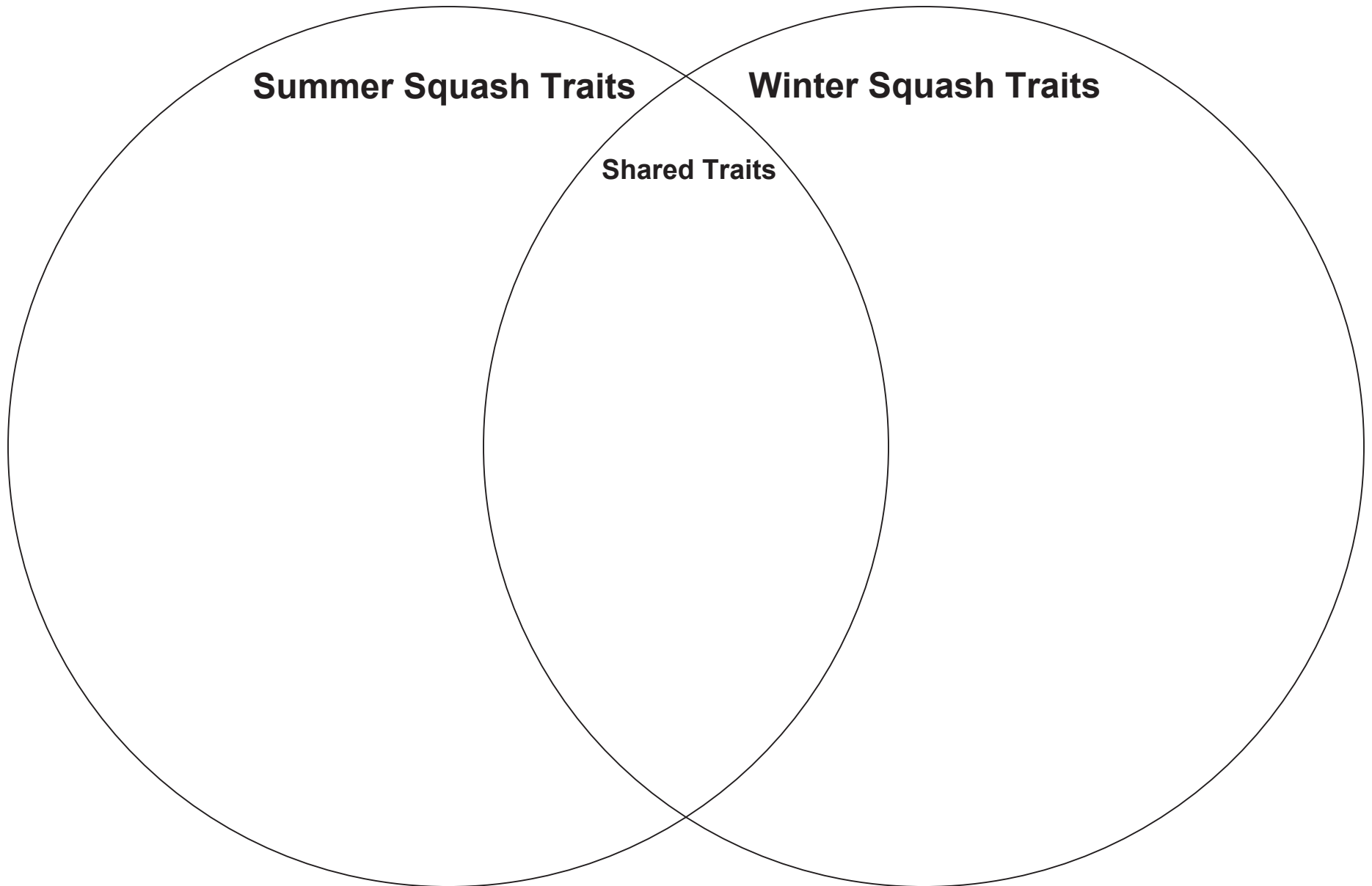
- Printed or digital images of summer squash (zucchini, yellow squash) and winter squash (Hubbard, Cushaw, butternut)
- Pre-made fact sheets or observation cards with details about each squash type (skin texture, storage, flavor, harvest time, culinary uses, size, vine growth)
- Compare-and-contrast chart (columns for summer squash, winter squash, both/shared traits)
- Attached squash PowerPoint
- Pencils, markers

#### Instructions:

1. **Observation and Note-Taking:**
  - Students examine the images and/or fact sheets for each type of squash.
  - They jot down characteristics for summer squash, winter squash, and traits both types share.
2. **Fill Out the Compare-and-Contrast Chart:**
  - Column 1: Summer Squash Traits
  - Column 2: Winter Squash Traits
  - Column 3: Traits Both Share
3. **Discussion/Analysis:**
  - Students answer reflection questions such as:
    - How do the differences in skin and storage affect how each squash is used?
    - Why might one type be more useful in certain communities or seasons?
    - What patterns do you notice about squash growth, nutrition, and preparation?
4. **Optional Extension:**
  - Have students **rank or rate** the squash types for different uses: eating fresh, baking, long-term storage, or cultural significance.



# Squash Investigation



**TEACHER EXAMPLE**

## Indigenous Languages Vocabulary Sheet (6-8)

**Directions:**

- In Column 1, rewrite the word in English.
- In Column 2, rewrite the word in your own Native language (if available). If it's not available, you may use the Native language of a neighbor, friend, or community member.

Vocabulary Word	English Rewrite	Navajo	Cherokee
		Language Rewrite	Language Rewrite
Turkey			
Seed saving			
Navajo Hubbard Squash		naayízí	watsigu (wa-jsee-goo) or waguga (wa-goo-gah) for Squash
Navajo Cushaw Squash		Naayízí tseíí	“ ”
Long Walk			
Harvesting			
Tradition			

## STUDENT WORKSHEET

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