

K-5 Lesson Guide: Squash

Vocabulary:

- Squash
- Seeds
- Food
- Rattle
- Turkey

Engage:

- Read the digital book to the class: [The Story of Squash](#). This book is modified for (K-3) -or- *The Story of Squash* narrative included in the educator's guide (3-5).
- Explain to students that there are many kinds of squash, but there are two types of Navajo squash (Hubbard and Cushaw). *The Story of Squash* refers to the Navajo Hubbard squash.
- Have students draw their own photo of Navajo squash.
- Explain that the rest of their lesson will focus on squash, what they're used for, and how they're grown.

Explore and Explain:

- Activity 1: Read the attached text about squash to learn more about its traditional cultural context, including seed saving and agriculture production.
- Activity 2: Sometimes, squash seeds were used to give rattles their sound. Create your own rattle!
 - **Materials:**
 - **Body:** Cardboard tube, plastic bottle, or papier-mâché.
 - **Rattle Filler:** Buttons, dried beans, uncooked rice, squash seeds, or small pebbles.
 - **Decorations:** Markers, paint, fabric, feathers, beads or anything you like!
 - **Steps:**
 - **Build the Gourd:** Use your chosen container as the base.
 - **Add the Sound:** Put a handful of your rattle filler inside (i.e., squash seeds).
 - **Seal It Up:** Tape, glue, or close tightly so nothing spills.
 - **Decorate:** Add colors, patterns, or symbols that are meaningful to you.
 - **Shake and Play:** Try different rhythms and hear your unique sound!

Elaborate

- Listen to [Sophie's Squash](#) by Pat Zietlow Miller. Point out to students how Sophie's squash grew.
- Then, as a class, plant a squash seed or learn to seed save!
 - **Plant a Seed!**
 - Use the following [video](#) to show students how they'll plant their own seeds.
 - Materials:
 - Plastic cups
 - Markers to label
 - Planting media (soil)
 - Squash seeds

- Water
- **Seed Saving**
 - As a class, carefully cut open a squash.
 - Invite students to observe the inside of the squash—notice the seeds, pulp, and texture.
 - Choose a volunteer to scoop out the seeds from the squash. Use hands or a spoon to remove them from the pulp.
 - As a class, rinse the seeds gently in water to remove any remaining squash pulp.
 - Distribute at least one clean seed to each student.
 - Place the seeds on a paper towel or tray and leave them out to dry completely before planting or storing.
 - After two weeks, let students create an envelope to place the dried seeds in for next season's planting.

Evaluate

- After conducting these activities, review and summarize the following key concepts:
 - **Reflection Questions (whole group or journals):**
 - What did you learn about Navajo Squash today?
 - How can squash be used in different ways (food, seeds, rattles, planting)?
 - What was your favorite part of the lesson? Why?
 - **Show What You Know:**
 - Hold up the picture you drew of Navajo Squash and share one fact about it.
 - Shake your rattle and explain what you put inside and why.
 - Look at your planted seed: What do you think will happen next?

Suggested Lesson Activities:

- Learn vocabulary from Native languages.
- Read [*The Story of Squash*](#).
- Create your own rattle.
- Plant a squash seed!
- Learn to save seeds.

Additional Educator Resources:

- [Sophie's Squash](#) by Pat Zietlow Miller
- [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](#)

Squash

For Grades K–5: Please feel free to modify these lessons as needed to meet your students' needs.

The Story 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.

A long, long time ago, when the world was still new, the Turkey carried something very special. Turkey hid tiny seeds inside its wings and flew from the Fourth World, called the White World, into our world today, the Glittering World.

When Turkey shook its wings, the seeds fell down to the earth. From those seeds came the very first squash. Squash grew and grew, feeding the people. The seeds could always be planted again, so the food never ran out.

Squash was more than food. The soft inside could be eaten, boiled, or fried. When the squash dried and its shell grew hard, people used it to make rattles, bowls, and even cups for ceremonies. Squash became a gift that nourished both body and spirit.

Many years later, something very hard happened to the Navajo people. In 1863, soldiers forced them to leave their homeland and walk to a place called Fort Sumner. This was a very long and painful journey. But the women remembered Turkey's gift. Just like Turkey hid the seeds in its wings, the women sewed seeds into their clothing. When they arrived at Fort Sumner, they planted the seeds in secret. Even though only a few grew, those plants helped them survive. Squash was medicine for their hunger and hearts, reminding them of home.

After they returned in 1868, families kept planting squash, corn, and beans. Grandparents taught their children how to grow the vegetables, harvest them, and save the seeds for the next year. Some even stored squash under their beds all winter, keeping it cool to last until spring.

Today, squash is still important. Families remember the old stories; some still grow the special Navajo squash, round and strong, like a pumpkin. Squash reminds us of survival, sharing, and the strength of our people.

And if you listen closely, you might still hear squash whispering the promise it once gave: "If you eat me and take care of me, you will never be hungry. I will always take care of you."

Imagine squashes growing along long, twisting vines, their colorful shapes spilling across the garden or hanging from the ends of their stems, just as the Navajo people have grown and saved their special squashes for generations.

How do they grow?

Squash grows from tiny seeds into long vines with big, green leaves, which produce bright yellow flowers that bees help pollinate. Among the many kinds of squash, the Navajo people grow special varieties with unique shapes and colors. Navajo Hubbard squash is large and round, sometimes slightly elongated, with skin that can be green-blue, dark green, light pink, or orange, and sweet orange flesh inside. Navajo Cushaw squash has a long, curved neck like a tail, with striking green-and-white striped skin and cream to light orange flesh. After pollination, the female flowers swell into these squashes, which can be harvested when firm and mature. For generations, farmers, gardeners, and the Navajo people saved seeds from their best squashes to plant next year, ensuring these special varieties continue growing. Like other squashes, they can be baked, boiled, dried, or added to soups, and they grow best in sunny soil with plenty of water and room to spread.



Figure 1: Example of the Navajo Hubbard Squash.

From Farm to Table: Squash in the USA



Figure 2: Example of the Navajo Cushaw Squash

Squash is grown all over the United States, from big farms to small gardens, and it comes in many different shapes, sizes, and colors. Every year, farmers grow hundreds of millions of pounds of squash, including zucchini, summer squash, and winter squash. Some of the top squash-growing states are Michigan, California, Florida, New York, and Georgia, where the warm sun, rich soil, and plentiful water help the plants grow strong and healthy. On large farms, squash is planted in rows and cared for carefully so the vines can spread, and the fruits grow big. However, squash is also grown by smaller family farms and the Navajo people in the Southwest, who cultivate special varieties like Navajo Hubbard and Cushaw. The

Navajo carefully save seeds from their best squashes each year so that future generations can continue growing these important plants. Squash from these farms and gardens feeds families, fills markets, and even reaches kitchens across the country, showing how this ancient and nutritious plant remains important today.



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

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

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.



TEACHER EXAMPLE

Indigenous Languages Vocabulary Sheet (K-5)

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	English Rewrite	Navajo
			Language Rewrite
Squash			naayíí
Seeds			
Food			
Rattle			
Turkey			

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Indigenous Languages Vocabulary Sheet (K-5)

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