The Story of the Seminole Pumpkin

Food for Thought:

- How did the Seminole pumpkin's unique cultivation method reflect both environmental adaptation and strategies for survival during wartime?
- In what ways can the destruction of food supplies during conflict be understood as a form of warfare?
- How does growing and preserving traditional crops like the Seminole pumpkin help maintain cultural identity today?

Historical and Cultural Roots in Florida's Everglades

Long before industrial agriculture, native communities such as the Calusa, Creek, Miccosukee, and Seminole cultivated the Seminole pumpkin (*Cucurbita moschata*), a resilient and uniquely adapted squash native to Florida's challenging environment. These pumpkins were more than just sustenance they were a vital component of a complex relationship between people, land, and survival.

The Seminole people ingeniously trained the pumpkin vines to climb dead or girdled trees, allowing the fruit to hang safely above the swampy ground. This vertical cultivation protected the pumpkins from floods, pests, and animals, while also maximizing space in dense forest hammocks. The Miccosukee name, *Chassa Howitska* or "hanging pumpkin," reflects this adaptive technique.

Agricultural Ingenuity Amid Conflict

During the Second Seminole War (1835–1842), food security was not only an agricultural concern but also a matter of survival in a brutal guerilla conflict. Seminole communities relied on these elevated pumpkin patches hidden in tree hammocks small, forested islands amid the Everglades' vast wetlands. Their cultivation method provided both protection from spoilage due to the swampy ground and a strategic advantage, as crops were less visible and less accessible to invading soldiers.

The pumpkins' durability was remarkable; their thick skin allowed them to be stored for months, ensuring a reliable food supply through harsh seasons and military sieges. This resilience, combined with their nutritional value, made Seminole pumpkins a cornerstone of tribal food sovereignty in a time of upheaval.

Attack of the Seminole Pumpkins: Food as a Weapon

In July 1839, Chief Chekika, a leader among the Seminole, led a bold and devastating raid on a U.S. military outpost at Caloosahatchee. After the attack, he returned to his

home in the tree hammock, where pumpkins hung like glowing orbs, awaiting harvest. But Chekika and his band were pursued by U.S. troops led by Lt. Col. William Harney.

When the soldiers arrived, Chekika had vanished into the swamp, but the pumpkins remained. In a calculated act to undermine the Seminole's survival, the soldiers destroyed the pumpkin patch, shattering the fruits on the ground. This destruction wasn't just physical it was psychological and strategic, targeting the Seminole's food source to weaken their resistance.

This episode illustrates how, throughout history, food has often been used as a weapon in conflict. The Seminole pumpkins, growing high above the wet ground where traditional food storage was impossible, symbolized resilience and adaptation. Their destruction marked a devastating loss, but the pumpkins' legacy endures.

Biology and Growth Habits

The Seminole pumpkin thrives in Florida's subtropical climate, tolerating intense heat, humidity, and pests that challenge other crops. Its vines can stretch over 20 feet, growing vigorously when given vertical structures naturally climbing up girdled or dead trees in the wild.

Fruit maturity takes roughly 100–120 days. Their hard rind allows for long storage, sometimes up to a year, preserving food through the winter months. Modern gardeners often hand-pollinate flowers to compensate for the decline of native pollinators, ensuring healthy harvests.

Culinary Uses and Cultural Importance

Nearly every part of the Seminole pumpkin is edible. Young fruits are prepared like summer squash, leaves and shoots can be cooked like greens, and flowers are delicious when stuffed or fried. Mature pumpkins offer sweet flesh ideal for pies, soups, and roasting.

Historically, Seminole families would dry sliced pumpkin to store for leaner times. Today, the pumpkins continue to appear in traditional recipes, symbolizing a living link between past and present, heritage and sustenance.

Why Seminole Pumpkins Matter Today

Seminole pumpkins represent far more than a food crop they embody resilience, agricultural knowledge, and cultural identity. Reviving their cultivation supports biodiversity and reconnects communities to their ancestral lands and traditions.

In a modern context, these pumpkins serve as a case study in sustainable agriculture, demonstrating how native crops can thrive with minimal inputs in challenging

environments. Their history also invites reflection on the intersection of food, culture, and conflict.

Lesson Activity: ***The Seminole Pumpkin!***

Grade Level's: 9-12th

Vocabulary:

- Pumpkin
- Seed
- Sprout
- Vine
- Flower
- Resilience
- Tree Hammock
- Everglades
- Agriculture
- Girdled

Engage

- Give students 10 minutes to read the passage about Seminole pumpkins. Feel free to assign this in groups for shared reading as well.
    - Read: The Story of the Seminole Pumpkin
- Then, ask students to complete the K-W-L chart and share their thoughts with their group/class.

Explore and Explain

- Activity 1:
    - Use the attached vocabulary sheet to help students learn important words about growing pumpkins. As they work through the activity, support them in exploring these words in English and in Indigenous languages either their own or a friend's.
- Activity 2:
    - Watch the following video about *Traditional Ecological Knowledge*. Prior to watching the video, give students a venn diagram to complete that is representative of Traditional Growing of Seminole Pumpkins (Traditional) vs. Convention Methods of Growing Seminole Pumpkins (Current)
        - TEK
- Activity 3:
    - Watch the following: American Indian Pumpkin Mats. After, please have the students respond to the following prompt:
        - After watching the video on how to make a traditional American Indian pumpkin mat, write one paragraph explaining the cultural importance of the mat. Be specific about what it is used for, what it

shows about the community it comes from, and why agriculture and food traditions like this are important for protecting cultural identity and resilience.

Elaborate

- View the Pumpkin: How Does it Grow? video to learn more about how pumpkins are grown and harvested.
- Show the America's Heartland: Uses for Pumpkins 2-minute video clip.
- Show the video clip Libby's 100% Pure Pumpkin From Farm to Can. This video shows the pumpkin in a farmer's field, planting, harvest, and processing.
- Show the All About Pumpkins clip. This clip shares all of the nutrition information pertaining to pumpkins.

Evaluate

- Seminole pumpkins are a powerful example of cultural food resilience because they have been grown and preserved by native communities for generations, despite attempts to eradicate it.
- Pumpkins come in all shapes and sizes, and for many tribal communities, they've been much more than just food. Tribes have used them for trading, cooking, and even as materials for making things like sitting mats.
- Pumpkins are nutritionally beneficial, providing high amounts of Vitamin A, C, K and fiber.

Suggested Lesson Activities:

- Pumpkin Trading Cards
- KWL Chart
- Native Vocabulary
- Pumpkin Nutrition Worksheet
- Venn Diagram

Sources

- The Incredible Seminole Pumpkin
- What Are Seminole Pumpkins?
- Attack of the Seminole Pumpkins — Edible South Florida
- Seminole Pumpkin: by Cameron Lee — Seed St. Louis
- Oh My Gourd! Seminole Pumpkins and Other Uniquely Cultivated Seminole Foods — Florida Seminole Tourism

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

K-W-L

Use this worksheet to track your thinking as you explore the topic. Reflect honestly and thoughtfully. This tool is designed to help you engage more deeply with the material.

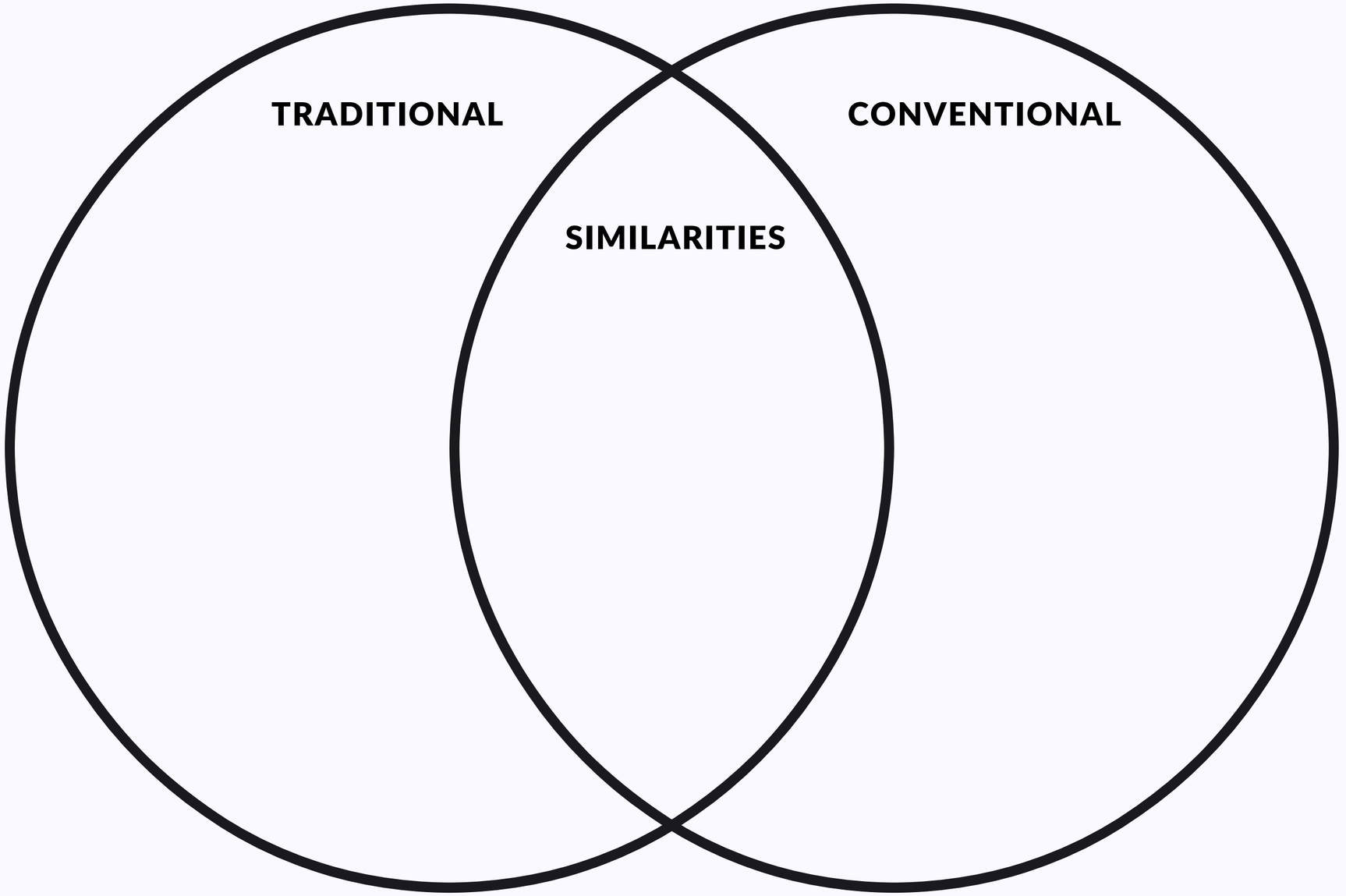
Lesson Topic:		
What I Already Know (K)	**What I Want to Know (W)**	**What I Learned (L)**

Reflection:

1. How did your understanding shift throughout this lesson?
2. How might this topic connect to real-world issues or your own life?

Venn Diagram Activity

Compare traditional and conventional pumpkin growing practices and uses. Identify the differences and similarities.



Native Languages Vocabulary Sheet

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 viable, you may use the native language of a neighbor, friend, or community member.
- In Column 3, choose a word in another native language of your choice, this could be the language of a friend, classmate, or one you are interested in learning.
- Definitions can be found in the provided texts.

Vocabulary Word	Definition	_____ Language Rewrite	_____ Language Rewrite
Pumpkin			
Seed			
Sprout			
Vine			
Flower			
Seminole			

Resilience			
Tree Hammock			
Everglades			
Agriculture			
Girdled			

Pumpkin Nutrition

Let's dive into the science behind one of fall's favorite foods!

Activity 1: Nutritional Analysis

Directions: Review the nutrition facts in the tables below and use the information given to answer the questions.

Part A: Fresh Pumpkin Facts

Serving Size: 1 cup cubed raw pumpkin (≈ 116g)

Nutrient	Amount	% Daily Value
Calories	30	-
Carbohydrates	8g	-
Fiber	0.6g	-
Protein	1.2g	-
Fat	0.1g	-
Vitamin A	12,231 IU	245%
Vitamin C	9mg	15%
Potassium	394mg	11%
Iron	0.8mg	4%

Part B: Product Comparison Chart

Complete the table below with your group:

Product Type	Serving Size	Calories	Vitamin A (% DV)	Fiber (g)	Added Sugars (g)
Raw pumpkin	1 cup cubed	30	245%	0.6	0
Canned pumpkin	1/2 cup	42	382%	3.6	0
Pumpkin pie filling	1/2 cup	140	110%	2	22
Roasted pumpkin seeds	1 oz	163	0%	1.8	0

Discussion Questions:

1. Which preparation method preserves the most nutrients?
2. How does processing affect the nutritional value?
3. What accounts for the calorie differences between preparations?

Your Answers:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Activity 2: Daily Value Calculations

Directions: Use the recommended daily values to answer the questions below.

Recommended Daily Values (Ages 14-18):

- **Calories:** 2000-2400 (varies by gender/activity level)
- **Vitamin A:** 900 mcg (males), 700 mcg (females)
- **Fiber:** 38g (males), 25g (females)
- **Vitamin C:** 75mg (males), 65mg (females)

Calculate and Show Your Work:

1. How many cups of raw pumpkin would provide 100% DV of Vitamin A?

Calculation: _____

Answer: _____

2. What percentage of daily fiber needs does 1 cup of canned pumpkin provide?

For males: _____

For females: _____

3. How many calories from pumpkin products could fit into a balanced 2000-calorie diet?

Calculation: _____

Answer: _____

Notes Section:

Use this space for additional observations or calculations:

Take-Home Extension (Optional)

Choose one project to complete:

□ **Family Recipe Analysis:** Analyze a family pumpkin recipe and present healthier modifications

□ **Community Garden Research:** Investigate local pumpkin growing and its nutritional/environmental benefits

□ **Cultural Cuisine Exploration:** Research how different cultures use pumpkins nutritionally

Due Date: _____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Create a Pumpkin Product Trading Card

Front: Draw or attach an image of a pumpkin product (soup, candy, smoothie, parfait, mats, etc.)

Back: Use complete sentences to answer the following about your product:

1. What region does your pumpkin product represent regionally or culturally? If it is nationally representative, please write "national."
2. How do you prepare your pumpkin product?
3. What is it used for? (food, medicine, decoration, etc.)
4. Why is your product relevant or important in the world today?
5. Trade your card with a neighbor and learn about their pumpkin product. Trade multiple times if time allows.
    -Traditionally, trading was a means of subsistence for tribes.

Front of Trading Card

Back of Trading Card

Food for Thought: What did your tribe trade traditionally?