

Corn – America’s Wonder Crop

Along the Texas Eagle route and throughout the Midwest, we see so much corn that it’s easy to yawn and turn away. But corn has an astounding history and so many uses, you might want to sit up and admire it for a while.

Corn, as we know it, never existed as a wild plant, and can only survive if planted and tended by humans. At least 7000 years ago, farmers in Mexico found a wild grass called teosinte and through selective breeding, gradually developed it to have large, closely spaced kernels. The crop spread, and eventually Indians throughout North and South America depended on it for much of their food. When Europeans made contact with people in the “new world” they saw corn for the first time. It is very likely that the first Thanksgiving featured corn.

This staple of Native Americans contributes more to today’s U.S. diet than any other single food. If “you are what you eat” as the old saying goes, then Americans are corn chips with legs, according to author Michael Pollan. Pollan reports that of the 45,000 items in an average American supermarket, more than a quarter contain corn. Corn is used in the production of soft drinks, baby food, pudding, marshmallows, ice cream and a vast array of snack foods, just to name a few. It also dominates the diets of hogs, poultry and cattle raised for meat and dairy products.

Of course, corn is not only used for food. Corn products we use every day include paper and cardboard packaging, paint, insulation, soap, rayon, antifreeze, explosives, glue, medicines, insecticides and many more. The U.S. also uses corn in the production of approximately 13.7 billion gallons of ethanol annually. Ethanol is an alcohol which is blended with gasoline to reduce air pollution and improve the performance of cars.

How much corn do we grow in the U.S.? In 2009 a record number of 86.5 million acres of corn were planted, for a harvest of 13.2 billion bushels. The economies of Illinois, Iowa, and other Midwest states depend heavily on this crop. Even though few people are directly involved in growing and harvesting corn, many jobs are tied to processing, marketing and farm machinery. This may be why the corn industry is more heavily subsidized by the federal government than any other business.

As you enjoy some chips, a soft-drink, or hamburger, you can appreciate those fields of corn outside the train windows for the many ways that corn impacts our American lifestyle.

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