NO PREP

Cranberries, Corn, and Trade

The Geography of Thanksgiving Foods

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Cranberries, Corn, and Trade: The Geography of Thanksgiving Foods

From Bog to Bowl: Cranberries and Place

Thanksgiving's tart staple—the cranberry—is a masterclass in how physical geography shapes food systems. Cranberries thrive in acidic, sandy soils and shallow wetlands commonly called bogs. Contrary to the commercials, cranberries don't grow submerged; growers flood bogs temporarily to harvest by floating ripe berries free from vines. In the United States, production clusters in Wisconsin, Massachusetts, New

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Corn, Sweet Potatoes, and the American Food Belt

Another Thanksgiving anchor, corn, links Indigenous agricultural genius to modern commodity geography. Domesticated from teosinte in Mesoamerica, corn spread

north along trade routes and farming frontiers, becoming a pillar of diets and ceremonies. Today's Corn Belt (Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Nebraska, Minnesota, and neighbors) features deep mollisol soils, a continental climate, and vast mechanization, producing corn for feed, ethanol, sweeteners, and food. While your table may feature cornbread, corn pudding, or tortillas, much of the crop moves invisibly through supply chains as corn oil, starch, or HFCS in sauces and desserts. Thanksgiving also draws on sweet potatoes, heavily grown in North Carolina and Mississippi, and wheat from the Great Plains that becomes pies and rolls. These belts reflect comparative advantage: regions specialize where climate, soils, and infrastructure confer lower costs and reliable yields. Holiday timing amplifies logistics. Elevators load grain onto unit trains; processors schedule mill runs; and refrigerated trucks (the cold chain) shuttle perishables like fresh cranberries, greens, and dairy for pies. A storm over the Rockies can delay flour shipments to West-coast bakeries; a Mississippi River bottleneck can slow soy oil that would otherwise be in pie crust shortening. Because Thanksgiving is a national event pinned to a single week, suppliers build buffer inventory and redundant routes, but tight margins discourage excess slack. Students can trace their menus back through these networks and see a continental web of farms, feedlots, mills, warehouses, and highways humming to meet one dinner's deadline.

Routes, Risks, and the Cold Chain: Getting to Your Table

Thanksgiving foods ride a ladder of transport modes chosen for cost, speed, and temperature control. Rail moves bulk grain efficiently over long distances; trucks handle the "last mile" to grocers. For perishable goods—fresh produce, cream, butter, eggs—the cold chain keeps temperatures within narrow bands to preserve quality and safety. Warehouses use cross-docking to transfer pallets rapidly without long storage, a strategy that cuts costs but increases vulnerability to delays. A late barge, a closed pass on I-80, or a labor shortage at a distribution center can cascade into empty endcaps for cranberry sauce or pie shells. Retailers hedge by diversifying suppliers and origins (e.g., mixing Wisconsin and Pacific Northwest cranberries, or sourcing pumpkins from multiple valleys), but diversification adds distance and emissions. Holiday geography also includes consumer behavior. Regional traditions create localized spikes—oyster stuffing along the Mid-Atlantic, tamales in the Southwest, or wild rice in the Upper Midwest. Grocers adjust planograms and

reorder points by ZIP-code demand history. Meanwhile, price promotions—"buy-one-get-one" cranberries or discounted turkeys—shift purchasing across stores and even across county lines. The net effect is a seasonal migration of calories: millions of units flow from specialized landscapes to suburban kitchens over a few days. Understanding these flows clarifies why planning, storage, and transportation are just as important as recipes in producing a successful Thanksgiving.

Key Information: Quick Reference: Where Staples Come From and How They Travel

Food Staple	Main U.S. Sources	Typical Path to Store	Vulnerabilities
Cranberries	Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Oregon	Bog → processor → refrigerated truck/rail → DC → store	Frost, wet harvest delays, icy roads
Corn (for foods/oils)	IA, IL, NE, MN, IN	Farm → elevator → rail → mill/refinery → truck → store	River/rail bottlenecks, fuel costs
Wheat (flour)	Great Plains (KS, ND, SD)	Farm → elevator → rail → mill → truck → bakery/store	Winter storms, mill downtime
Sweet potatoes	North Carolina, Mississippi	Farm → curing storage → truck (often refrigerated) → store	Storage humidity, holiday surges
Pumpkins	IL (processing), regional fresh	Field → processor or truck to regional DCs → store	Early frost, rain at harvest

Case Study Excerpt — A Can of Sauce, A Continent of Places: Mapping a Thanksgiving Cranberry

On a chilly October morning near Tomah, Wisconsin, a grower checks a low basin ringed by sandy berms. The cranberry vines are dense and springy, set in acidic soil that holds water like a sponge. The berries have turned from pale green to deep garnet, signaling harvest. Workers flood the bog just enough to float ripe berries. A corrugated boom sweeps them gently to a corner where a pump lifts the bobbing fruit into a waiting truck. The truck rumbles to a nearby processing plant, where the berries are washed, sorted by color and bounce, and routed—some to sweetened dried cranberries, others to a line that cooks and sets jellied cranberry sauce in sterile cans. Each can gets a laser-printed code linking it to that harvest day and plant. Pallets head to a regional distribution center (DC) by rail—cheaper over distance—then transfer to trucks for final delivery. The chain seems routine, but geography keeps nudging it. A cold snap in late September trimmed yields in a handful of marshes; a week of rain forced one farm to delay flooding, crowding the processor's schedule. Meanwhile, a rock slide closed a stretch of I-94, pushing trucks onto county roads and adding hours to delivery windows. None of this cracks the holiday—because months earlier, the retailer booked buffer inventory, and the processor reserved rail slots and secondary trucking carriers. By mid-November, a shopper in Cleveland lifts a familiar cylinder from an endcap stacked ceiling-high. The label tells a short story—brand, ingredients, nutrition—but the can itself is a map. It traces wetlands shaped by glaciers, a plant sited near water and labor, cold storage timed to demand, and a web of rails and highways. If a blizzard thunders across the Great Lakes that week, the DC can ship from a backup lot; if a promotion sells through faster than forecast, an extra intermodal container stands ready. Geography isn't just where the bog is; it's the choreography of places, times, and flows that transform a tart berry into the most reliable side dish on the table.

1. In the case study, identify two geographic or logistical factors that could have delayed the cranberry cans and explain how the system buffered against each.

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2. Why do crops like cranberries cluster in a few regions, and how does that specialization create both efficiency and risk for Thanksgiving supply?

Multiple Choice

1. Which factor best explains why cranberries are produced in a handful of U.S. states?

    a) High elevations needed for berry color

    b) Access to saltwater irrigation from aquifers along the Atlantic coast

    c) Specific soil, water, and climate conditions suited to bog cultivation

    d) Federal law restricting berry production

2. What role does the cold chain play in Thanksgiving logistics?

    a) It maintains temperature for perishables from processor to store, protecting quality and safety

    b) It determines farm planting dates

    c) It replaces the need for warehouses entirely

    d) It speeds rail and truck traffic through difficult mountain passes by clearing snow early each day

3. Why do retailers build buffer inventory ahead of Thanksgiving?

a) To reduce store labor needs

b) To avoid using trucks

c) To keep prices high during peak holiday demand weeks by holding product off the shelves until the rush

d) To absorb shocks from storms, harvest delays, or transport bottlenecks during a fixed, high-demand week

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Comparative advantage	A) A full train of a single commodity moving from origin to destination
2. ___ Unit train	B) Inventory strategy minimizing on-hand stock by timing deliveries closely
3. ___ Cross-docking	C) Temperature-controlled distribution for perishables
4. ___ Cold chain	D) Regional specialization based on lower opportunity cost
5. ___ Just-in-time (JIT)	E) Rapid transfer of goods through a warehouse without long storage

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Cranberry bogs are typically harvested by _____ the field to float ripe berries for collection.

2. Grain and flour often move long distances by _____, while trucks handle the _____ mile to stores.

3. Regional food belts reflect _____ advantage, where climate and soils lower the cost of production.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Choose one Thanksgiving staple (cranberries, sweet potatoes, wheat for pies). Describe its production region and one transport route to your state or region.

2. Explain one benefit and one risk of just-in-time inventory for a holiday with a single, fixed date.

3. Propose two steps a grocery chain could take to reduce geography-related disruptions for Thanksgiving next year.