September Farm to School Updates and Highlights

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Farm to School in Seneca County: Back To School Updates

In New York September means back-to-school, the end of “summer”, and the first signs of fall, but it also means a bounty of fresh produce, including the tail end of warm weather crops like tomatoes, melons, and sweet corn, and the beginning of late season fruits and vegetables like apples, carrots, squash, and pumpkins. Throughout the year, Seneca County Cornell Cooperative Extension assists schools in our county by coordinating procurement of local food products and providing education about local farms, foods, and gardening through the Farm to School (F2S) program funded by a grant from the NYS Department of Agriculture and Markets.

Each month Seneca County school cafeterias feature a different New York State Harvest of the Month produce item. For September schools are serving local sweet corn on their menus for NY Thursdays. Throughout the month Food Service Directors will be offering a variety of dishes highlighting NY sweet corn. In upstate NY sweet corn is readily available this time of year as it is typically planted from early April through early July to have a steady supply through summer and fall. Well-adapted to production in NY, this warm-season vegetable is grown in every rural county in the state with 23,000 acres planted for fresh market and 40,400 for processing annually, making it a major field crop for the state.

New this year, the Seneca County F2S program will be creating posters with historically and culturally relevant information for each harvest of the month produce item. Many facts will help students understand where foods originated and why they are an important part of our diet today. In addition, September 15th – October 15 is Hispanic Heritage Month, which holds much relevance to this month’s produce item. Corn, or maize, was domesticated from a grass called teosinte by the peoples of central Mexico approximately 10,000 years ago. To the Indigenous people of Mexico, corn was not merely a food, it was tied to their daily life and the growing cycle influenced the timing of festivals. Maize was also a symbolic component of architecture and crafts. As the Indigenous people migrated north to the present-day North America, they brought corn with them. Corn remained unknown to the rest of the world until Spanish explorers brought it back to Europe over 500 years ago. The first sweet corn originated as a result of a natural mutation that restrained the conversion of sugars to starch and caused kernels to accumulate about two times more sugar and significantly less starch than field corn. European settlers collected the first variety of sweet corn, Papoon, from the Indigenous people of North America in the 1770’s. Some of the sweet corn we are able to enjoy today can contain three to four times more sugar than traditional sweet corn varieties. Cobs are usually picked while the plant is immature and before sugar has a chance to turn into starch.

Nutritionally, sweet corn is still considered a starchy vegetable, but it is also rich in fiber and micronutrients like vitamin C, vitamin B5, and manganese. The dietary fiber content of sweet corn, including soluble and insoluble fiber, can help with certain digestive conditions and promote the growth of beneficial bacteria in the gut. One cup of sweet corn also contains almost 5 grams of protein, which is more than a comparable serving of broccoli. Sweet corn is relatively easy to prepare. From simple or spruced up corn on the cob to salads, salsas or stir-fry, one can find many different ways to enjoy sweet corn. If you have never tried Mexican street corn, or Elotes, you can make your own version with the recipe below. Don’t forget you can get fresh sweet
corn at your local farmers markets or roadside stands. We look forward to the school year ahead and highlighting a new local produce item every month for NY Thursdays. Make sure you look out for next month’s F2S feature!

To watch recipe videos featuring sweet corn and other farm to school educational tips, visit Seneca County CCE’s website at www.senecacountykkece.org/farm-to-school or follow the Farm to School Facebook page at www.facebook.com/CCEsenecaF2S.

Recipe: Grilled Mexican Street Corn (Elotes): yields 8 cobs

Prep Time: 15 minutes
Cook Time: 10 minutes
Total Time: 25 minutes

Ingredients:
8 ears corn, shucked
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
1 cup crumbled cotija cheese or feta cheese, divided
½ cup mayonnaise
½ cup Mexican crema or sour cream
½ cup cilantro leaves, minced, plus more for garnish
2 teaspoons lime zest
1 teaspoon ancho chile powder
Lime wedges, for serving

Directions:
1. Light a grill. On a sheet pan, toss the corn with the oil, then season with salt and pepper.
2. In a small bowl, stir together ⅔ cup of the cotija cheese with the mayo, sour cream, cilantro, lime zest and chile powder to combine.
3. Place the corn on the hottest part of the grill and cook, turning as needed, until cooked through and charred, 8 to 10 minutes.
4. Remove the corn from the grill and immediately brush each cob liberally with the cheese mixture and transfer to a platter. Garnish each cob with a sprinkle of the remaining ⅓ cup of cheese and more cilantro, then serve with lime wedges.

References:
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With over 100 years of serving the people of the County, Seneca County Cornell Cooperative Extension puts to practical use the scholarship and research of Cornell University and the national land grant system in the areas of agriculture and food systems sustainability; nutrition, food safety and security, and obesity prevention; 4-H youth development, and children, youth, and families; environment and natural resources, sustainable energy and climate change; and community and economic vitality. The office is located at 308 Main Street Shop Centre in Waterloo. For more information about this and other programs, please visit our website: www.senecacountykkece.org, our Facebook pages: @CCESeneca, @senecacounty4hny, @WildHarvestTable, @CCEsenecaF2S, and contact us at 315-539-9251 or email seneca@cornell.edu.

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