

9-12th Lesson Guide: Cherokee Trail of Tears Bean

Vocabulary:

- Sovereignty
- Resilience
- Continuity
- Displacement
- Resistance
- Heirloom
- Food Sovereignty
- Reclamation
- Self-determination
- Preservation

Student Instructions: *Using the vocabulary words listed above, work collaboratively in groups to create a set of vocabulary flashcards. Write the vocabulary term on one side of the card and the translation in an Indigenous language of your choice on the reverse side. Incorporate visuals, symbols, and color-coding to strengthen language association and memory retention. Be intentional about presentation, clarity, and accuracy in your translations.*

Engage:

- Discuss with students what they know about beans as. Have them name as many kinds of beans as they can.
- Then, tell them that bean bread is one of the traditional foods of the Cherokee people. It is often eaten at family dinners and large gatherings, too. Have students watch the video of [Cherokee Bean Bread](#) with Chef Niko of the Cherokee Nation to emphasize the importance of beans among the Cherokee people.
- Ask students what traditional foods/other foods with beans they enjoy eating. Then, begin introducing the Cherokee pole bean.

Explore and Explain:

- Share with students the following story in the Educators Guide, *Carried in Their Pockets: A Story of Seeds and Sovereignty*.
 - As students read the story, have them complete the attached *Seeds to Survivors worksheet*. Remind students that these beans are a special heirloom variety known as the Cherokee pole bean.
- Explain to students that multiple varieties of beans exist. Share with them physical examples of beans so that they may touch and see them, including the Cherokee Pole Bean (heirloom/non-heirloom).
 - If available, allow students to plant a pole bean seed in a cup.
 - Have students journal and measure heights of bean sprouts once a week until its time to transplant the seeds outdoors.

Elaborate

- After planting a bean seed, work with students to plan an area outdoors to begin a small school garden. Have them review the following video to keep companion planting in mind as they make their plans:
 - In small groups (2-4 people), have students create their own school garden design plans.
 - Give students a list of vegetables or plants they can implement in the garden as well.
 - As students work, have them find the nutritional value of the items they decide to plant in their garden plan.
 - Upon completion, have students display their group garden designs. Allow all students in class to vote on the preferred garden plan and then implement it as a class.

Evaluate

- Remind students of the contributions made by Dr. Wyche to preserve heirloom seeds like the Cherokee pole bean.
- Explain the importance of growing beans to many tribes and how they used them to for subsistence.
- Remind students that growing these Indigenous foods contributes to the reclamation of Indigenous food systems and help us restore our traditional diets, which contribute to our overall health.

Suggested Lesson Activities

- Indigenous Vocabulary: Flash Cards
- Seeds to Survivors

Additional Educator Resources:

- [Vibrant Earth Seeds – Cherokee Trail of Tears Bean](#)
- [Victory Seed Company – Cherokee Trail of Tears Bean](#)
- [Bunk History – How Cherokee Trail of Tears Beans Connect a Community to Its Roots](#)
- [Atlas Obscura – Cherokee Trail of Tears Beans](#)
- [Food Sovereignty | Indian Health Service](#)
- [Tribal Food Sovereignty Resource Directory | National Congress of American Indians](#)
- [Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance](#)
- [Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative](#)

Carried in Their Pockets: A Story of Seeds and Sovereignty

For Grades 9-12: Please feel free to modify these lessons as needed to fit the needs of your students.

In every seed, there is a future waiting. But sometimes, there is also a past. Long before the United States stretched from coast to coast, the Cherokee people lived throughout the southern Appalachian region across what is now North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Alabama. Their towns were built along rivers, their homes surrounded by fields, and their lives were rooted in agriculture. They grew corn, squash, and beans, part of a planting system now widely known as the Three Sisters. These crops were not simply sources of food. They were part of a carefully balanced relationship between people, land, and responsibility.

Among these crops were small, glossy black beans.

Year after year, Cherokee farmers planted these beans in the spring. They observed the soil, watched the weather, and passed down agricultural knowledge through generations. After each harvest, families carefully saved the strongest seeds to plant again the following year. This practice, known as seed saving, was both practical and cultural. It ensured food security, but it also ensured continuity. Each seed carried genetic memory, shaped by the soil, climate, and care of Cherokee hands.

But in 1838, this continuity was violently interrupted. Under the authority of the Indian Removal Act, the United States government forced the Cherokee people from their homelands. Despite legal resistance, including a Supreme Court decision affirming Cherokee sovereignty, the federal government proceeded with removal. Soldiers entered Cherokee communities, forcing families from their homes, and confining them in stockades. From there, approximately 17,000 Cherokee people were forced to travel west over nearly 1,000 miles to Indian Territory, in present-day Oklahoma.

This journey became known as the Trail of Tears. The name reflects the immense suffering that occurred along the way. The Cherokee people endured freezing temperatures, disease, hunger, and exhaustion. An estimated 4,000 to 6,000 Cherokee died during the forced migration.

They were not allowed to bring much with them. Most were forced to leave behind their homes, tools, livestock, and fields. Their farms developed over generations were abandoned.

But some Cherokee people carried something small enough to hide and powerful enough to matter. They carried seeds.

These seeds were tucked into pockets, sewn into clothing, or hidden among personal belongings. They took up little space, but their significance was immense. Carrying seeds was not simply about future food. It was about survival, identity, and resistance. It was a refusal to allow Cherokee agricultural knowledge to disappear.

The seeds traveled the same path as the people. They endured the same cold. They survived the same journey.

When the Cherokee people finally reached Indian Territory, they arrived in an unfamiliar environment. The soil was different. The seasons behaved differently. The forests and rivers did not match the ones they had known. Everything had been altered.

Yet the seeds remained.

When spring came, Cherokee families planted them.

The act of planting represented more than agriculture. It represented restoration. It was a way of rebuilding what had been taken. As the seeds germinated, green shoots emerged from the soil, followed by climbing vines and purple-tinged pods. Inside those pods were the same glossy black beans that had been carried across the continent.

These beans became known as Cherokee Trail of Tears beans.

Their survival represented something extraordinary. Despite displacement, despite loss, despite attempts to erase Cherokee presence from their ancestral lands, Cherokee agricultural traditions endured. The beans became living evidence of resilience.

Unlike industrial agriculture, which often depends on uniformity and external control, Cherokee agriculture depended on relationships—between people, plants, and place. Seed saving allowed Cherokee families to maintain sovereignty over their food systems. It ensured independence. It preserved genetic diversity. And it protected cultural identity.

Each time the beans were planted, they reinforced continuity between past and present.

They were not relics.

They were participants in an ongoing story.

Today, Cherokee Trail of Tears beans are still grown. Cherokee families and seed keepers continue to plant, harvest, and save them. These beans connect present generations to ancestors who carried them through one of the most difficult forced migrations in American history.

Their survival challenges a common assumption that removal meant disappearance.

It did not.

The Cherokee people remain.

Their agricultural knowledge remains.

Their seeds remain.

The beans exist as living archives, carrying history not in written words but in biological form. They represent adaptation without surrender, continuity without permission, and survival without forgetting.

In this way, the beans did more than survive the Trail of Tears.

They carried the Cherokee future within them.

And every time they are planted, that future continues to grow.

Seeds of History: Dr. John Wyche and the Cherokee Pole Bean

Phaseolus vulgaris is the scientific name of the Cherokee pole bean. Dr. John Wyche, a Cherokee tribal member, dentist, and seed saver from Hugo, Oklahoma, gave the beautiful and prolific bean variety to Seed Savers Exchange in the 1970s. Dr. Wyche was a founding member of the Seed Savers Exchange. Not only did Dr. Wyche donate the seeds of the Cherokee pole beans, but he donated countless other seeds to the Exchange. Wyche was infamous for seed sharing with community members. Preserving these seeds was a way to help protect the connection to their Cherokee ancestors. These beans are currently being used for the reclamation of traditional foods among the Cherokee people, but they are also widely used among gardeners.



Food Sovereignty: Reclaiming Indigenous Food Systems Today

The story of the Cherokee Trail of Tears beans is not only a story of the past. It is also a story of the present and the future. Today, Indigenous communities across the United States are working to reclaim their traditional food systems. This effort is known as Indigenous food sovereignty.

Food sovereignty means the right of a people to control their own food systems. It includes the right to grow traditional foods, save ancestral seeds, and pass agricultural knowledge to future generations. For Indigenous Nations, food sovereignty is closely connected to cultural survival, health, and self-determination.

For generations, Indigenous food systems were disrupted by forced removal, land loss, and government policies designed to separate Native people from their traditional lands and agricultural practices. These disruptions limited access to traditional foods and weakened systems of seed saving and agricultural knowledge that had existed for thousands of years.

Despite these challenges, Indigenous communities never stopped protecting their agricultural traditions.

Organizations such as the Native American Agriculture Fund, the Intertribal Agriculture Council, and the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative support these efforts. These organizations provide resources, education, and funding to Native farmers and Tribal communities. They help restore traditional farming practices, protect heirloom seeds, and strengthen Tribal food systems both traditional and modern.

Seed saving remains a central part of this work. Indigenous seed keepers serve as caretakers of ancestral knowledge. By preserving and sharing traditional seeds, they protect biodiversity, cultural identity, and agricultural independence. These seeds represent generations of adaptation, survival, and resilience.

Food sovereignty also improves community health and strengthens economic independence. Growing traditional foods allows Indigenous communities to reduce reliance on external food systems and restore culturally meaningful diets. It also provides opportunities for education, community building, and the transfer of knowledge between elders and youth.

The Cherokee Trail of Tears beans are one example of this larger movement. Their survival represents more than the endurance of a single crop. It represents the endurance of Cherokee people, knowledge, and sovereignty.

Today, when Cherokee farmers plant these beans, they continue a practice that began long before removal. They honor their ancestors. They protect their culture. They strengthen their communities.

The seeds carried in pockets nearly two centuries ago continue to grow.

Name: _____

Date: _____

From Soil to Survival: Understanding Cherokee Agricultural Traditions

Directions: Answer each question in complete sentences. Use evidence from the story to support your thinking.

1. Why was seed saving important to the Cherokee people beyond just providing food?

Explain both agricultural and cultural reasons.

2. How did the Trail of Tears disrupt Cherokee agricultural traditions?

Explain both the physical and cultural impacts.

3. The Cherokee people entered a completely new environment in Indian Territory. Why was it significant that the seeds still grew? What does this symbolize?

4. How does the story show the connection between identity and agriculture?

Use specific examples from the reading.

5. Why do you think the author focuses on something as small as a bean to tell a much larger historical story?

6. How did carrying seeds act as a form of resistance?

Explain how this small act challenged removal and cultural erasure.

7. The story says the beans are “not relics” but “participants in an ongoing story.” What does this mean?

8. Compare Cherokee agricultural practices to industrial/commercial agriculture. What differences does the story highlight, and why are those differences important?

9. Do you think food can carry history? Use evidence from the story to support your answer.

10. What is the most important message of this story, and why do you think it still matters today?

TEACHER EXAMPLE

Indigenous Languages Vocabulary Sheet (9-12)

Directions:

In Column 1, rewrite the word in English. In Column 2, write the definition of the word in your own words, then in Column 3 rewrite in 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	Definition	Language Rewrite
Sovereignty			
Resilience			
Continuity			
Displacement			
Resistance			
Heirloom			
Food Sovereignty			
Reclamation			
Self-determination			
Preservation			

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Indigenous Languages Vocabulary Sheet (9-12)

Directions:

In Column 1, rewrite the word in English. In Column 2, write the definition of the word in your own words, then in Column 3 rewrite in 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	Definition	Language Rewrite
Sovereignty			
Resilience			
Continuity			
Displacement			
Resistance			
Heirloom			
Food Sovereignty			
Reclamation			
Self-determination			
Preservation			