

6-8th Lesson Guide: Cherokee Trail of Tears Bean

Vocabulary:

- Heirloom
- Food Sovereignty
- Resistance
- Continuity
- Sovereignty
- Reclamation
- Cherokee

Student Instructions: *Work in groups to create vocabulary flashcards using the words listed above. Write the vocabulary word on one side of the card. On the other side, write the translation in an Indigenous language of your choice. Students should use pictures and different colored markers or pencils to help them remember each word and what it means. Make sure they are creative and that your cards are neat and easy to read!*

Engage:

- Allow students to brainstorm the following, “What type of beans do you know of or eat?”. Have students list their ideas on the classroom board.
- Then, allow students to watch the Bean Bread [video](#) with Chef Nico Albert of the Cherokee Nation.
 - Reiterate that beans are a traditional Cherokee food and that they are often eaten at gatherings.
 - As a class, review the ingredients listed in the bean bread [recipe](#).
- As a class, ask the students the following, “Why were beans important to the Cherokee people?”
 - Then introduce the Cherokee Pole Bean (an heirloom variety).

Explore and Explain:

- Read “The Seeds That Walked” aloud or in pairs.
- With students, discuss the following:
 - Why did families carry seeds during the Trail of Tears?
 - What do seeds represent other than food in this story?
- As a class, compare heirloom and non-heirloom beans. Observe how they look and their growth requirements.
- Plant the variety of seeds in a cup, including Cherokee Pole Beans, and begin to track the growth of the beans as a class on a weekly basis.
- Discuss with students that just as they planted beans, Cherokee people planted them as well. This was an act of survival, resistance, and cultural preservation.
 - Cherokee families maintained their continuity and sovereignty by saving seeds even though they were moved so far from their own homes.
 - Dr. Wyche continued their legacy by saving these seeds for continued use as well.

Elaborate

- Explain to students that Cherokee Pole Beans are twinning vines. This means they climb upward as they grow, latching on to whatever is in their path.
 - As a class review the trellis building activity. Then, take a walk outside. While outside, have students gather the materials to build their own trellis.
 - Activity #1: Trellis Building Activity

Evaluate

- Class Discussion: Why are Cherokee pole beans culturally and historically important?
- Share with students the following prompt, “What do these seeds teach us about survival, resilience, and culture?”
 - As a class discuss shared thoughts and responses upon completion.

Suggested Lesson Activities:

- Indigenous Vocabulary Flash Cards
- Trellis Building Activity

Additional Educator Resources:

- [Burning Cedar Sovereign Wellness](#)
- [PBS Food: Cherokee Bean Bread](#)
- [USET: Food Sovereignty](#)
- [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](#)
- [Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative](#)

The Seeds That Walked

For Grades 6-8: Please feel free to modify these lessons as needed to fit the needs of your students.

In the early 1800s, the Cherokee people lived across the forests, mountains, and river valleys of what is now Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Alabama. Their communities were strong. They built homes, governed themselves, and grew food from the land. Among their most important crops were beans, small, dark seeds that provided nourishment and strength.

These beans were more than food. They were part of Cherokee identity.

Families saved seeds from each harvest and passed them down through generations. These seeds connected children to their grandparents and their grandparents' grandparents. They carried stories within them. But in 1838, everything changed.

The United States government forced the Cherokee people from their homelands. Soldiers came and removed families from their homes and placed them in camps. From there, approximately 17,000 Cherokee people were forced to walk nearly 1,000 miles west to what is now Oklahoma. This journey took place during winter, and many people suffered from hunger, disease, and cold. About 6,000 Cherokee people died during the journey. This forced migration became known as the Trail of Tears.

Cherokee families were not allowed to bring much with them. They left behind homes, tools, and gardens. But some people carried something small and powerful, seeds.

They hid the seeds in pockets, in bundles, in hatbands, and even sewn into their clothing.

Why did they carry seeds when they had so little space?

Because seeds meant survival. They meant the future. They represented home.

One Cherokee descendant explained that even when people had to leave everything behind, if they could save one thing, it was their seeds. The seeds represented their culture, their traditions, and their connection to their ancestors.

When the Cherokee people finally reached their new land in Oklahoma, they were exhausted. They were far from the forests and rivers they had always known. The soil was different. The climate was different.

But they still had their seeds. They planted them in the ground.

Slowly, green vines grew. Leaves stretched toward the sun. Dark pods formed, holding the same shiny black beans their ancestors had protected during the journey.

These beans became known as the Cherokee Trail of Tears beans.

Planting them was an act of resistance.

Planting them was an act of remembrance.

Planting them was an act of survival.

The beans continued to grow year after year. Families saved seeds and passed them down to their children, just as their ancestors had done before the Trail of Tears. These beans became living links between past and present.

One Cherokee seed keeper explained, “It’s not just preserving seeds, it’s preserving our culture, our history, our way of life.”

Over time, Cherokee families continued protecting these seeds. Even after generations, the beans remained in Cherokee hands. They were grown, harvested, and saved, ensuring that Cherokee culture could continue.

Today, Cherokee Trail of Tears beans are still grown.

They remind people of the ancestors who carried them through hardship.

They remind people of resilience and the ability to survive, adapt, and continue.

They remind people that culture cannot be erased when it is protected.

Every time someone plants one of these beans, they are continuing a story that began long ago. They are honoring those who walked the Trail of Tears and survived.

The beans are living history.

They walked with the Cherokee people.

They survived with the Cherokee people.

And they will continue to grow.

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

The Cherokee pole bean, also called *Phaseolus vulgaris*, is an heirloom bean with a long history. Dr. John Wyche, a Cherokee tribal member and dentist from Hugo, Oklahoma, helped make sure these beans were saved for the future. In the 1970s, he gave Cherokee pole bean seeds to the Seed Savers Exchange, a group that helps protect and share important seeds.

Dr. Wyche shared many other seeds too, and he was well-known for giving seeds to community members. Saving and sharing seeds helped Cherokee people stay connected to their ancestors. Today, these beans are not only grown by Cherokee families to reclaim traditional foods, but they are also enjoyed by gardeners everywhere.

Food Sovereignty: Reclaiming Indigenous Food Systems Today

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

Food sovereignty means that a community has the right to grow and choose its own food, save seeds from year to year, and pass farming knowledge to the next generation. For Indigenous Nations, it is connected to culture, health, and independence.

For hundreds of years, Indigenous communities faced challenges such as being forced from their lands, losing farms, and government policies that made it harder to grow traditional foods. Even with these challenges, communities never stopped protecting their farming traditions.

Organizations like the Native American Agriculture Fund, the Intertribal Agriculture Council, and the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative support this work. They give resources, education, and funding to Native farmers and communities. They help protect heirloom seeds, restore traditional farming, and strengthen tribal food systems.

Saving seeds is a very important part of this work. Indigenous seed keepers act as caretakers of cultural knowledge. By saving and sharing seeds, they protect biodiversity, cultural traditions, and independence. These seeds show generations of adaptation, survival, and resilience.

Food sovereignty also helps communities be healthier and more independent. Growing traditional foods reduces reliance on outside food sources, restores meaningful diets, and provides ways for elders and youth to learn from each other.

The Cherokee Trail of Tears beans are one example of this larger movement. Their survival shows not only the endurance of the beans but also the strength of the Cherokee people, their knowledge, and their culture. Today, when Cherokee farmers plant these beans, they are continuing a practice that began long ago, honoring their ancestors and protecting their community. The seeds that were carried in pockets nearly 200 years ago still grow today.

Trellis Building Activity

Materials:

- Cherokee pole bean seeds
- Stakes, sticks, bamboo, or other upright supports
- String, twine, yarn, or zip ties
- Gardening gloves and small hand tools
- Notebook or sketch paper for planning

Steps:

1. **Plan the Trellis:**
 - In small groups, identify a sunny location.
 - Sketch a trellis design: height, structure, and supports for twining vines.
2. **Build the Trellis:**
 - Insert upright stakes and secure cross-pieces or string for climbing.
 - Use natural or recycled materials creatively.
3. **Plant the Beans:**
 - Plant seeds at the base of the trellis.
 - Discuss how vines will grow and wrap around supports.
4. **Observe & Reflect:**
 - Journal design choices and why the trellis will support bean growth.
 - Discuss connections to historical Cherokee agricultural practices.
5. **Optional Extension:**
 - Track growth weekly and adjust trellis as needed.
 - Compare designs and discuss which supports the healthiest growth.

Use this section below to draw what your trellis might look like before building it.

TEACHER EXAMPLE

Indigenous Languages Vocabulary Sheet (6-8)

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
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STUDENT WORKSHEET

Name: _____

Date: _____

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