



Of all the children's activities I have, my "corny" suitcase—full of food products with corn as an ingredient, as well as a few without corn—is the most requested! Cornell professors, extension staff, and school teachers all ask to borrow the corny suitcase to work with their respective audiences. It is always a hit at fairs and festivals when I need an engaging plant activity that fits on a table. Or it can be used for an active relay race down the corn rows late in the fall or through rows of chairs inside a classroom. The object of the corny suitcase is to let students discover how frequently corn is used in prepared foods.

Why corn? Because corn is the largest source of human food in the United States, when measured by how much is eaten, both directly and indirectly as feed for livestock and poultry. Corn also leads other food crops in the number and significance of its non-food uses. Plantations' corn-related activities, including those conducted at our 1997 Judy's Day event, "Corn: The A-Maize-ing Grain," help children appreciate corn, an important plant of the Native Americans.

For information on the September, 2004 Judy's Day, see page 12.



A "Corny" Judy's Day Activity

Text and photos by Raylene Ludgate, Judy's Day Youth Education Coordinator

Materials:

- Canned corn, corn oil, corn starch, and corn syrup

I use these products as an introduction to the various forms of corn used in our foods.

- A variety of food products that contain corn

You can go to the grocery store (or raid your cupboard) to find products that contain corn. Purchase some products that are relatively easy to spot, such as tacos, corn oil, or corn chips. Then read labels to get many more products containing corn that are not as obvious. Sauces, cereals, juices, sodas, salad dressings, cake and cookie mixes, non-dairy creamers, crackers, cocoa mix, croutons, gum, candy, and many other prepared foods contain corn starch or syrup. Believe it or not, even Spanish rice has corn starch as an ingredient. Also, check out dog food, cat food, and aspirin.

- A few food products that don't contain corn in any form

Finding food items without corn is challenging and helps support the objective of the activity. I remember looking at a dozen or so canned soups before I found one (Campbell's chicken noodle) that didn't have corn as an ingredient. I found instant oatmeal with maple sugar rather than corn syrup as a sweetener. I also found a box of tapioca and Crisco shortening (cottonseed and soy oils). I mark a yellow X on the bottom of food items that don't contain corn to distinguish them from those that do.

- Old suitcase or other container to carry products to activity site

- (optional) A bag of candy with corn syrup as the first ingredient

If participants successfully bring back all products that contain corn at the relay or guess which products don't contain corn in the table display, a wrapped piece of candy may be given as a prize and as another way to point out that some form of corn is in many foods, including the candy they are eating. A healthy and tasty alternative is freeze-dried sweet corn, found in some health food stores and organic gourmet markets.

- (optional) Non-food products that contain corn are also fun and educational to display. These include:

- Magazines containing corn starch in their paper
- Corn-based fiber, called Ingeo (www.the-mannings.com/manningscatalog.cgi or www.ingeofibers.com)
- Packing peanuts made from corn starch that breaks down with water
- Plastic containers (www.naturesplastic.wilkmfg.com), disposable cutlery (www.earthwarebiodegradables.com/products-c.html), or golf tees containing corn products; these supposedly break down more quickly than petroleum-based plastics
- Pens made from corn starch
- Dog chewing bones containing corn products



A “Corny” Judy’s Day Activity *(continued)*



Young students read food labels to figure out what doesn’t contain corn in an evening program at a local school.



Even big kids enjoy playing in a pool of dried corn!

The following activities make great learning experiences for groups. But even without a group, try challenging your child or young friend the next time you go shopping to find prepared food that doesn’t contain corn as an ingredient. This is a great way to get young people reading labels and thinking about what is in the food products they buy.

Corn Relay Activity

Divide the group into relay teams. For a group of 20 divided into four teams of five students each, you would need four items that do not contain corn and 20 items that do. For each team, lay a pile of products (one more than the number in the team) at a given distance, remembering to include one product that doesn’t contain corn. When you call “start,” the first member of each team goes to the food products in their team’s pile and chooses one that has corn and brings it back. The game continues until the first team that has taken all but one product yells “corn!” to indicate they have finished. Products are checked, and if the first team has mistakenly brought back a product that doesn’t contain corn, it is out, and the game continues until another team yells “corn!” I encourage players to read labels, take their time,

and not just guess. I often highlight the word “corn” in the ingredient list to help younger players pick out the word. I also do a variation of this activity in which all groups are winners: the activity is over when the last team finishes and all teams yell “corn” together; everyone then gets a small corn-containing candy treat.

End the game by asking players which corn-containing products they were most surprised by. Most young people are surprised that they are eating corn when they drink soda or eat prepared tomato sauce. You may want to point out that these products contain corn syrup, which, like sugar, has many empty calories. Ask players to read ingredient lists for a week to find out which other corn-containing products they eat.

Table-Top Activity

In addition to all the food products listed in the materials section, I usually have a poster board that reads, “Can you pick out a product that does not contain corn?” Then I lay out all the food products (and non-food items, if you have some) randomly on the table and ask visitors to pick out an item that doesn’t contain corn. I then have them read the ingredients to see if they were correct.

Eventually, they find a product without corn and get their corny treat. If there is more than one person in the group, each person has to find a different non-corn item.

If you use any of these activities, I would love to hear from you! Send comments, critiques, questions, and variations to Raylene Ludgate, Judy’s Day Youth Education Coordinator, at Cornell Plantations, One Plantations Road, Ithaca, NY 14853 or e-mail rgl3@cornell.edu.

We extend special appreciation to the SIRUS Fund and Saquish Foundation for their generous gifts to expand our Judy’s Day program.



 **Cornell Plantations**

One Plantations Road
Ithaca, NY 14850-2799
www.plantations.cornell.edu