

# Agriculture in Poetry

## Objective

Students will read and discuss a variety of poems with agricultural themes and write their own poems based on food and agriculture.

## Background

Over the years food, agriculture and rural life have been a rich source of inspiration for poetry. Understanding agriculture helps us in several ways. It helps us grasp the ag-related imagery used in poetry, and reading poetry with agriculture-related imagery gives us a peek into a way of life unfamiliar to many of us. It helps us from a historical perspective when we read poetry that examines a way of life that is in the past, and reading poetry set in cultures different from our own helps give us a multicultural perspective.

The poems included with this lesson provide some good examples. If you know that crop rotation involves planting different crops in the same field with each season, you can better understand the progression described in Gordon Bottomley’s poem, “The Ploughman.” It also helps to know that the word “corn” in the past was the word used for any grain, not just what we know as corn, which was called “maize.”

Walt Whitman’s poem, “This Compost,” probably makes little sense if the reader doesn’t understand the process of composting—that dead matter is transformed to provide nutrients for new life planted in the soil.

Peggy Pond Church is a poet from New Mexico, where farming is dependent upon acequias, irrigation ditches that move water into the fields from a nearby river. Knowing about the acequias help the reader understand what she is describing.

## English Language Arts

1. Read and discuss background and vocabulary.
  - As a class, read one or more of the poems provided with this lesson. Discuss unfamiliar vocabulary.
  - Students will read the poem quietly to themselves and write their responses to share with the class.
  - Discuss the difference between hearing the poem and reading it independently.
2. Provide copies of the “How to Read a Poem” handout. Discuss.
  - Students will each select one of the poems listed in the sidebar on the next page. Students will find their selected poems online (See the Ag in Poetry link on the OAITC website: <http://www.clover.okstate.edu/fourh/aitc/lessons/extras/songs/poems.html> ) or in the library.
  - Students will research the poet who wrote the selected poem and be

## Oklahoma Academic Standards

### GRADE 6

Speaking and Listening: R.1,3; W.1,2. Reading and Writing Process: R.1,2,3. Critical Reading and Writing: R.1,2,4,7; W.2,3. Vocabulary: R.1,3,5; W.2. Research: R.1,2,3; W.1,2,3,4

### GRADE 7

Speaking and Listening: R.1,3; W.1,2. Reading and Writing Process: R.1,2,3,7; W.2,3. Vocabulary: R.1,3,5; W.2

### GRADE 8

Speaking and Listening: R.1,3; W.1,2. Reading and Writing Process: R.1,2,3. Critical Reading and Writing: R.1,2,4,7; W.2,3. Vocabulary: R.1,3,5; W.2. Research: R.1,2,3; W.1,2,3,4

### GRADES 9–10

Speaking and Listening: R.1,3; W.1,2. Reading and Writing Process: R.1,2,3,7; Critical Reading and Writing: R.1,2,4,7; W.2,3. Vocabulary: R.1,3,5; W.2. Research: R.1,2,3; W.1,2,3,4

### GRADES 11–12

Speaking and Listening: R.1,3; W.1,2. Reading and Writing Process: R.1,2,3; Critical Reading and Writing: R.1,2,4,7; W.2,3. Vocabulary: R.1,3,5; W.2. Research: R.1,2,3; W.1,2,3,4

## Some Poems With Food and Agriculture-Related Themes

- “Ode to Tomatoes,” Pablo Neruda
- “Blackberry-Picking,” Seamus Heaney
- “The Cow in Apple Time,” Robert Frost
- “Fiesta Melons,” Sylvia Plath
- “Peach Trees,” Peggy Pond Church
- “My Strawberry,” Helen Hunt Jackson
- “Plowing Through Ashes,” Walter McDonald
- “This Compost,” Walt Whitman
- “This is Just to Say,” William Carlos Williams
- “Perhaps the World Ends Here,” Joy Harjo

For more poems with food and agriculture-related themes, go to the “Ag in Poetry” section on the OAITC website: <http://www.clover.okstate.edu/fourh/aitc/lessons/extras/songs/poems.html>

prepared to make a short presentation about him/her.

— Students will prepare the poems to read aloud to the class and be prepared to discuss imagery, meaning, their relation to agriculture, etc.

3. Collect a sampling of agriculture-related items (pecans, leather, cotton, wheat, fruits, vegetables).
  - Place items at stations around the classroom. Assign a number to each item and place a bag next to it with several slips of paper. Write the corresponding number on the bag to match the station.
  - Students will visit each station around the room and use their imaginations and creativity to record their impressions of each agricultural product (color, shape, smell texture, etc.) on the slips of paper. Each student should write a single word or short phrase describing the item on a slip of paper then place it in the station’s bag.
  - Divide students into small groups. Give each group a bag. Students will work in groups to use the words and phrases inside the bags to create poetry about each item. Students may use any style of poetry they choose.
  - Students will avoid naming the item in their poems so the class can guess what it is from the description in the poem. (Activity adapted from Oregon Ag in the Classroom Foundation.)
4. Some of our best-known poets have written well-loved poems focused on one particular food (Pablo Neruda’s “Ode to Tomatoes,” William Carlos Williams’ “This is Just to Say,” Jack Prelutsky’s “A Pizza the Size of the Sun.”) Read one or more poems focused on a particular food as a class. (See “Ag in Poetry” on the OAITC website.) Discuss.
  - Students will select a favorite food and write a poem focused on that food. Instruct students to start by just describing the (color, shape, texture, etc.) and then organize their thoughts into poetry form.

## Additional Reading

Heaney, Seamus, and Ted Hughes (editors), *The Rattle Bag*, Faber and Faber, 2005.

MacGowan, Christopher, *William Carlos Williams (Poetry for Young People)*, Sterling, 2003.

Paschen, Elise, and Dominique Raccah, *Poetry Speaks Who I am: Poems of Discovery, Inspiration, Independence, and Everything Else (A Poetry Speaks Experience)*, Sourcebooks Jabberwocky, 2010.

Schmidt, Gary D., *Robert Frost (Poetry for Young People)*, Sterling, 1994.

## Vocabulary

**acequia**— a community-operated watercourse used in Spain and former Spanish colonies in the Americas for irrigation

**agriculture**— the science or occupation of cultivating the soil, producing crops, and raising livestock

**axis**— a straight line about which a body or a geometric figure rotates or may be supposed to rotate

**compost**— a mixture largely of decayed matter of once living things (as grass) or their products (as coffee grinds) and used for fertilizing and conditioning land

**corruption**— physical decay or rotting

**crop rotation**— the practice of growing first one and then another crop on the same land especially to preserve the ability of the soil to produce crops

**eaves**— the lower edge of a roof that sticks out beyond the wall of a building

**fetor**— a strong, foul smell

**imagery**— language that suggests how someone or something looks, sounds, feels, smells, or tastes

**infectious**—capable of contaminating with a disease-producing substance or germ

**inveterate**— firmly established by age or by long continuation

**irrigation**—the process of supplying with water by artificial means

**mould**— British spelling for mold, light rich crumbly earth that contains decaying matter (as leaves)

**orchard**— a place where fruit or nut trees are grown

**pallid**— lacking healthy color

reaper— a worker who cuts (as grain) or clears (as a field) with a sickle, scythe, or machine

**resurrection**— raising from the dead : bringing back to life

**ridge**— a raised or elevated part or area

**rural**— of or relating to the country, country people or life, or agriculture

**visage**— the outward appearance of a person, animal, or thing

**yearn**— to desire eagerly

# Ag in Poetry

THIS COMPOST, BY Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

Behold this compost! behold it well!  
Perhaps every mite was once form'd part of a sick person—yet behold!  
The grass of spring covers the prairies,  
The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden,  
The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,  
The apple-buds cluster together on the apple-branches,  
The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves.  
What chemistry!  
That the winds are really infectious,  
That all is clean forever and forever,  
That the cool drink from the well tastes so good,  
That blackberries are so flavorful and juicy,  
That the fruits of the apple-orchard and the orange-orchard, that  
melons, grapes, peaches, plums, will none of them poison me,  
That when I recline on the grass I do not catch any disease  
Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,  
It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,  
It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless succession  
of diseased corpses,  
It distils such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,  
It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from  
them at last

PEACH TREES, BY PEGGY POND CHURCH

Do not hurry past this orchard too quickly  
Saying: Yes, surely that is a beautiful thing.  
As though the moment of flaming were the  
purpose of this orchard  
Accomplished now that your all-claiming eyes  
have seen it.  
Remember that before these trees were ever planted,  
A thin, small, unprotesting beast of burden  
Dragged a curved plough through the reluctant earth,  
With a man stooping behind in the hot sun to  
guide it.  
Remember a wide ditch had to be dug here  
to coax the river  
Up the dry, stubborn flanks of these hills, a  
long time barren,  
And that a woman, ageless as the brown hills are ageless,  
Hoed the difficult earth about the young roots planted,  
And dreamed, before ever the slender branches had budded,  
Of yellow fruit spread to the sun in her dooryard  
in autumn.

THE PLOUGHMAN, BY GORDON  
BOTTOMLEY

Under the long fell's stony eaves  
the ploughman, going up and down,  
Ridge after ridge man's tide-mark  
leaves,  
And turns the hard grey soil to brown.

Striding, he measures out the earth  
In lines of life, to rain and sun;  
And every year that comes to birth  
Sees him still striding on and on.

The seasons change, and then return;  
Yet still, in blind, unsparing ways,  
However I may shrink or yearn,  
the ploughman measures out my days.

His acre brought forth roots last year;  
This year it bears the gleamy grain;  
Next spring shall seedling grass  
appear:  
Then roots and corn and grass again.  
Five times the young corn's pallid  
green  
I have seen spread and change and  
thrill;  
Five times the reapers I have seen  
Go creeping up the far-off hill:

And, as the unknowing ploughman  
climbs  
Slowly and inveterately,  
I wonder long how many times  
The corn will spring again for me.

# How to Read a Poem

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1. Look at the poem's title. What might this poem be about?
2. Read the poem aloud without trying to understand it.
3. Read it again for understanding. Start with what you know. Underline the parts you do not understand. Look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary.
4. Now read the poem as if it were prose. Rearrange words to more normal prose order.
5. Write a short first impression of the poem. What do you notice about the poem so far? What do you think the poem is about?
6. Look for patterns. Watch for repeated, interesting or unfamiliar use of language, imagery, sound, color or arrangement. What might the poet be trying to do with these patterns?
7. Look for changes within the poem—in tone, focus, narrator, structure, voice, patterns. What has changed and what does the change mean?
8. Who is speaking in the poem? What does the poem tell you about him or her?
9. Re-read the poem aloud from start to finish. Circle those portions you still do not understand.
10. Explain to someone else what you think the poem means.
11. Find the crucial moments in the poem. Look for words like “but” or “yet.” Such words often act like hinges to swing the poem in a different direction. Pay attention to breaks between stanzas or between lines.
12. Did the poet use a specific form, such as a sonnet or an ode? Did the poet use specific poetic devices such as assonance, alliteration, symbols, metaphors or allusions? How does the poet use capitalization and punctuation?
13. Read the poem aloud again. Return to the title and ask yourself what the poem is about and how it relate to the title.