Thanksgiving is a deeply treasured holiday that brings families and friends together in celebration of a bountiful harvest, and all we have to be grateful for. Turkey is the common centerpiece of today’s Thanksgiving feast, with stuffing, gravy, cranberry sauce, and mashed potatoes as traditional accompaniments. Other side dishes vary to reflect regional differences, with sweet potatoes, squash, pumpkin, green beans, Brussels sprouts, carrots, parsnips, turnips, Waldorf salad, and pickles commonly gracing our tables. For plant-based eaters, Thanksgiving can cause anxiety, especially if your loved ones have expectations that are outside of your comfort zone. How do we navigate a celebration that is centered around a very animal-based centerpiece? The answer is with love, compassion, and plenty of delicious plant-based food!

For some individuals, Thanksgiving is a holiday that they prefer to share with those who embrace their passion for plant-based eating. Plant-based potlucks or gatherings with like-minded family or friends make perfect sense. This year, due to COVID, the celebration may be limited to immediate family, so it could present the perfect opportunity for creating new traditions. Enjoying a purely plant-based Thanksgiving feast does not mean cutting your nonveg extended family out of Thanksgiving. You might begin a new tradition of hosting a family pancake breakfast or a scavenger hunt followed by hot chocolate and pumpkin pie.

For other individuals, Thanksgiving is all about family, regardless of where they lie on the diet spectrum. When the festive meal is shared by people with very different dietary leanings compromise and compassion become the order of the day. Imagine this scenario. It is your year to host Thanksgiving dinner. You have
been plant-based for less than a year. Your dad has let you know in no uncertain terms that he expects turkey. Your sister reminds you that its only once a year, and that a traditional meal is a must. You do not want to stuff and cook a turkey, but you do want to celebrate with the family you love. Imagine a second scenario. It is your parent’s year to host the meal. You know the meal will feature turkey, sausage cornbread stuffing, gravy, mashed potatoes with cream and butter, sweet potato casserole with marshmallows, green bean casserole with cheese, and pumpkin pie with eggs and whipping cream. How can a plant-based eater host or attend a Thanksgiving dinner that is typically loaded with animal products? The following tips will help you create a joyful, compassionate Thanksgiving with the omnivores you adore.

You are the Host

1. If you are comfortable having turkey in your home, but not comfortable preparing or purchasing it, ask another family member to make the turkey, dressing and gravy. You can make the plant-based centerpiece, all the side dishes, dessert, and beverages.
2. If you are not comfortable having turkey in your home, ask your family and friends if they would be open to a plant-based feast. Make a centerpiece you know everyone would love – or make two centerpieces (e.g. tofu turkey and stuffed squash). If they are resistant, consider asking someone else host the Thanksgiving meal, and offer to prepare a few of the dishes. You might also consider hosting another special event such as a brunch or a games night.
3. Make your table look festive and inviting. Decorate with fall colors and a natural centerpiece.
4. Go all out with the side dishes – make them look gorgeous (which is easy to do with colorful vegetables). Make plant-based versions of family favorites, and perhaps add one or two new additions that you know everyone will love.
5. Enjoy the company. Talk about all the things you are grateful for, regale your family with stories of days gone by, play games, or sing songs around a fire.
You are the Guest

1. Talk to the host about what you can do to help with the meal. Offer to make a plant-based centerpiece, stuffing, and gravy.

2. Discuss the side dishes and dessert and find out if your host is willing to do some of the side-dishes plant-based. If your host is willing, offer to supply plant-based substitutes for the dairy/eggs, and perhaps some wonderful recipes. You might suggest using a little olive oil instead of butter on the Brussels sprouts or egg replacer and plant-based cream in the pie. If she prefers to use butter and milk for the mashed potatoes, you might offer to bring plant-based milk and prepare a separate bowl for your family.

3. Express your gratitude for everything your host does to accommodate you and your family.

4. Be positive and light-hearted in your conversations. Avoid any negative comments about the food (whether those comments be about health, ethics, or the environment).

5. Be compassionate. For many of us, eating plant-based is about compassion – for animals and for people. Being compassionate means being conscious about your choice of words. It means lifting others up and really trying to feel what they are feeling. It means being grateful, and showing it in your thoughts, actions and deeds.