

Lesson 5

Student Handout 5.2—Importance of the Columbian Exchange

One American Crop Has an A-maizing Global Impact

The global spread of foods originating in the Americas has been staggering. Corn and potatoes fed a hungry Europe while Africa and Asia quickly adopted other American food plants. Maize, or corn, is a drought-tolerant food. It stores well and gives needed calories. Maize traveled to Morocco and West Africa in the sixteenth century. From there, it was adopted in Egypt and parts of the Ottoman empire. Maize spread to Africa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and became an important food in South Africa. Maize continued its travel to Southeast Asia and China where it was used in peasant diets.



Steve Hurst @ USDA-NRCS PLAN

http://plants.usda.gov/gallery/pubs/zema_002_php.jpg

Caloric Cassava, or the Mighty Manioc

Cassava, also called manioc, is a tropical plant with edible roots. The root is tuber-like and similar to a potato when boiled. Cassava or manioc is a native of Brazil but grows in any tropical environment. When this food was transferred to Africa, it spread from Angola to West Africa and became a main food yielding important calories. Most of us who live in a temperate climate zone know of this food crop as “tapioca” and enjoy it as a dessert. However, manioc has become a vital food crop to those who live in the tropics. The manioc plant is a large shrub and is harvested when it reaches between five and twelve feet. The leaves can be eaten, but the roots, which can grow up to two feet long, are the most prized as a foodstuff. Poor and dry soils do not adversely affect this food, nor do pests that ruin other crops. In parts of the Congo, manioc will yield five tons per hectare of land that cannot support maize. Chiefly a starchy food, it contains vitamins and other important nutrients. It is bountiful and grows either in dry or rain-drenched lands.



Photo by David H. Byrne, Texas A&M University

<http://aggiehorticulture.tamu.edu/features/costarica/cassava.html>

The Potent Portable Potato

The potato, originally from the Andes Mountains, spread throughout the world as an important food crop, staving off famine in various regions. The potato became a mainstay in Ireland and Northern Europe and Russia. At first, Europeans regarded the potato with fear and dread. They believed, for example, that it could cause leprosy or that it might lead to “rot and gas.”¹⁰ But the Irish adopted the potato in the last years of the sixteenth century. The soil was favorable to its growth in Ireland. Living in poverty and malnourished, the peasantry regarded it as a “gift.” It would grow on a small amount of land and nourish a family quite well. While the potato became a staple in Ireland, it also caught on in England by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the industrial revolution brought more people to the cities. It spread to France on the European continent, where it enjoyed new prestige and was even served at the royal table of Marie Antoinette.¹¹ The potato was adopted in Hungary after a famine in 1772 and became an important crop in eastern Europe. It was Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, who promoted its adoption in Russia. After severe failures of other crops in 1838 and 1839, the potato gained in popularity. By 1900, Russia was one of the world’s top potato producers. It continues to be so today.



Photo by R. Dunn

What About the Rest of Us Foods? (We’re Not Chopped Liver!)

Other foods from the Americas also diffused throughout the globe. These include the sweet potato, peanuts, cacao, pineapple, squashes, beans, tomatoes, and several other plants. Africa, Indonesia, China, and Europe all benefited from these new foods.

What Old World Foods Went To The Americas?

Food crops that went from Afroeurasia to the Americas were part of the Columbian Exchange, but in the opposite direction. These included wheat, oats, barley, and citrus fruits. When grown on the immense plains of the Americas, these food crops transformed farming after the sixteenth century. Plantation owners also made huge profits growing Old World “**cash crops**,” notably sugar, coffee, and cotton. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, slaves brought by force from Africa grew most of these commercial crops. The horse, an Afroeurasian animal, transformed life for plains Indians in the Americas, and cattle ranching spread across North America, Brazil, and Argentina.

¹⁰ Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972), 182.

¹¹ Crosby, *Columbian Exchange*, 184.