

Pepper History

Origins and Spread of Peppers



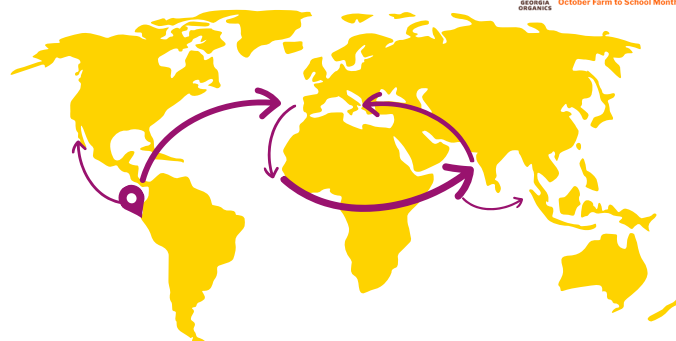
- Humans have been growing peppers for nearly 6,000 years! Researchers identified grains of Capsicum, the chemical component making peppers hot, on 6,000-year-old cooking stones and pots in Ecuador.
- Hot peppers were a large part of the Mesoamerican diet. Aztec and Mayan food traditions used hot peppers not only to flavor food, but also to disinfect houses and to cure illness.
- Scientists believe that birds transported wild pepper seeds from their origination site to other regions of Mesoamerica. Birds were able to spread pepper seeds because they lack the receptors that feel the burn.



This vessel has Mayan inscriptions and markings on it that indicate the purpose of this bowl was strictly for chilies!

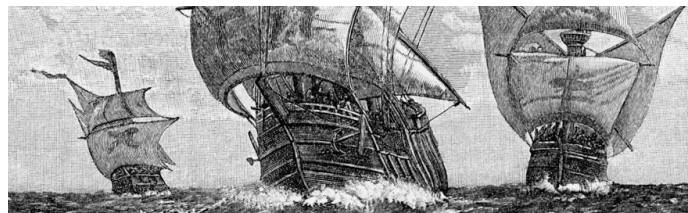
Peppers in the United States

- While there are some wild hot peppers that grow in the southwest region of the US and are found in Indigenous cuisine, chili peppers became more common in the US with the African slave trade. After hot peppers were introduced in West Africa via the Portuguese imperialists, they became a staple in their food traditions. Slave traders brought large quantities of hot peppers on the transatlantic journey, and then the slaves grew them on plantations.
- Peppers have helped scientists learn about treating chronic pain! In 2021, two American physiologists received a Noble Peace Prize for their work using Capsicum to understand how heat receptors translate the chemical compound into electrical signals to the brain. The discoveries about how our body processes pain have big implications for the future of pain management!



Peppers Around the World

- When explorer and imperialist Christopher Columbus arrived on the island of Hispaniola (modern-day Dominican Republic and Haiti), one of his flagships ran onto a shallow reef and could no longer set sail. The Taino people, an indigenous tribe living on the island, helped offload the ship and offered the Spaniards a banquet in their honor. During the feast, Columbus tried aji for the first time, a hot pepper common in Taino food heritage. He immediately told his men to collect as much aji as possible because he wrongly believed that hot peppers were the fruit that Indians used to get black pepper.



- In 1494, chili peppers arrived in Europe. They were originally presented to monks in monasteries from people on pilgrimage. At first, peppers were used as exotic plants to decorate gardens. However, some Portuguese monks discovered that the fruit on pepper plants would be a reasonable and cheap alternative to black pepper (which was so expensive at the time that it was used as currency in some places). This realization led Portuguese explorers to include peppers in their conquests and trade routes around the world, leading to the adoption of peppers in many parts of Africa and Asia.
- As peppers moved around the world, lots of different varieties began to appear. Most notably, in the 1800s, Hungarians began to breed hot peppers to develop a milder chili. Through these efforts, they were eventually able to breed a pepper that was consistently mild, and even sweet --- bell peppers!
 - Bell peppers were named 'bell' because of their distinctive sound. They used to be so loud that they would make a clacking noise in the wind, and even startle animals. In 1908, Gregor Carillon was able to alter the genetics of bell pepper, and he grew the first ever 'quiet bell pepper.'