

BORDER CROSSINGS

ORIGINS

BOTANY BAY LEARNING RESOURCES

Potatoes



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Patates.jpg>

Peru: Indigenous communities sharing potatoes in the Potato Park, near Cusco, Peru

Source: iied - International Institute for Environment and Development

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/iied/5217546050>

What do Indigenous people call this plant?

Potatoes originate from the Andean regions of South America. The Indigenous Quechua people call them “papa”, and the Indigenous Taino use the word “batata” for what we call “sweet potatoes”. When these people’s lands were colonised by the Spanish, these Indigenous words were adapted into Spanish as “patata”, and the English name “potato” derives from this.

When was this plant first documented?

The first record of potatoes was in 1537 - 1538 by Pedro de Cieza de León, a Spanish Conquistador and historian in his writings called “Chronicles of Peru” which were published in 1540.

How many varieties of this plant are known?

There are 5000 varieties of potato. The International Potato Centre based in Lima, Peru is a research centre which seeks to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable food security in developing countries. They hold samples of 4,870 types of potato. Very few varieties of potato are grown outside of South America.

Where and how was the plant originally grown and used?

It is believed that the Inca were the first to cultivate potatoes in the Andes (in modern day Peru). Wild potatoes grew around the shores of Lake Titicaca. Inca farmers began domesticating the potato and learning how to cook and preserve it. They were grown at 3,800 feet above sea level.

The Inca boiled and froze potatoes by leaving them outside overnight. The potatoes are left outside overnight repeatedly until they are dehydrated. These freeze dried potatoes are called 'chuño' and they can be stored for up to 15 years.

They also ground their potatoes to a pulp, soaked them in water and filtered them to create almidón de papa (potato starch) which is used to thicken stews and soups.

How do Indigenous people relate to this plant?

Peruvian potatoes soon formed the basis of the Inca diet, sustaining great cities and the Inca armies. The Inca boil, mash and roast their potatoes. They became a revered food, as the Inca also used potatoes to treat injuries, predict the weather, and make childbirth easier. The Inca even used the potato to measure time, as Inca units of time corresponded with the length of time it took to cook a potato to different consistencies.

When and how did this plant first come to Britain?

Potatoes reached Spain by 1569 - 1570. There is a document recording potatoes being served in the Sangre hospital in Seville in 1573. The Potato was introduced to Britain on 28th July 1586 by Sir Thomas Harriot. He had accompanied Sir Walter Raleigh on his voyage to the English colony in Roanoke (North Carolina) to study the wildlife. He brought back several bags of potatoes which he planted on Raleigh's estate. A few months after his return, he wrote a book, (A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia) where he described potatoes as, "Openavk are kind of roots of round forme, some of the bignes of walnuts, some far greater, which are found in moist & marish grounds growing many together one by another in ropes, or as thogh they were a string. Being boiled or sodden they are very good meate."

Special properties

They fermented potatoes in water to create a sticky potato pulp called 'toqosh' which was used as a natural antibiotic because penicillin is produced during the fermentation process. It is used to treat altitude sickness, colds, pneumonia, and stomach ulcers. The Inca believe it is a gift from Inti, the Incan Sun God, for the preservation of the body. Once the fermentation process has been completed, the toqosh is dried in the sun and stored for future use.

Fun facts

Peru celebrates National Potato Day on 30th May

It is believed that potatoes were domesticated approximately 7,000 - 10,000 years ago. Potatoes are 80% water.

According to the Guinness Book of World Records, the world's largest potato weighed 18lbs 4 oz (8.28kg) which is the same as 73 medium portions of McDonalds french fries.

In 1995, potato plants were taken into space on the space shuttle Columbia. This was the first time that food was grown in space!

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BOTANY BAY is a participation and learning project by Border Crossings' ORIGINS Festival, made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Thanks to National Lottery players, we have been able to engage five schools across the country with the Indigenous heritage of plants, gardens and food.



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