

BORDER CROSSINGS

ORIGINS

BOTANY BAY LEARNING RESOURCES

Tomato



Tomatoes, gouache on vellum, from the Gortorfer Codex, between 1649 and 1659
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gc5_tomatoes.jpg



A red tomato, along with leaves and flowers

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4c/Tomato_scanned.jpg

What do Indigenous people call this plant?

In Nahuatl (the Aztec language), "tomatl" refers to green tomatoes and "xitomatl" is used for red tomatoes. The name is said to mean 'plump thing with a navel'. The Spanish translated it as "tomate" which is where the English word "tomato" comes from.

When was this plant first documented?

The Aztecs grew large amounts of tomatoes and they were eaten regularly with other foods, as a sauce and as part of a meal. Bernardino de Sahagún recorded seeing "large tomatoes, small tomatoes, leaf tomatoes, sweet tomatoes, large serpent tomatoes, nipple-shaped tomatoes," and "tomatoes of all colors from the brightest red to the deepest yellow" in the Florentine Codex.

How many varieties of this plant are known?

There are now over 10,000 varieties of tomato in the world. Original varieties, often called 'heirloom' varieties, taste better. Modern hybrid strains have been created that are more uniform in shape and size, are more disease resistant and keep for longer - however, they have much less flavour.

Where and how was the plant originally grown and used?

Wild tomatoes originated in the Andes mountains of South America in what we now call Peru and Ecuador. They were first domesticated in pre-Columbian Mexico, according to archaeologists in around 500BC. Originally they were hard, small and sour. Careful cultivation by Indigenous people led to thousands of edible varieties.

How do Indigenous people relate to this plant?

The Aztec people give tomatoes as wedding gifts to increase fertility which may be why Europeans considered it to be an aphrodisiac and why it was called 'the love apple' in France, Italy and England.

When and how did this plant first come to Britain?

Tomatoes were not grown in Britain until the 1590s. They were considered poisonous and largely avoided by the British and colonists in the Americas for almost 200 years. However by the mid-1800s they were widely eaten.

Special properties

The Pueblo people from what is now the Southwestern United States believed that people that ate tomato seeds could gain the power of divination.

Fun facts

In the late 18th Century, a lot of Europeans wouldn't eat tomatoes. The tomato was also known as 'The Poison Apple' because many wealthy people became sick and died after eating them. Tomatoes are very acidic and the wealthy people often ate off pewter plates. The tomatoes absorbed the lead from the pewter which was what made people who ate them get sick and die.

The tomato was introduced to North American colonists by Europeans traders rather than by the Indigenous people.

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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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