

ORIGINS

BOTANY BAY LEARNING RESOURCES

Avocado



Image of an avocado tree from the Florentine Codex

<https://fia.umd.edu/answer-seed-dispersal-mechanisms-for-giant-seeds-and-search-strategies/>

What do Indigenous people call this plant?

The Aztec word “āhuacatl” is the name for the avocado and the word “ahoacaquahuitl” for the avocado tree. The Spanish word “aguacate” is derived from the Nahuatl name. The English word comes from the Spanish name.

When was this plant first documented?

Fernández de Oviedo is said to have been one of the first Europeans to try an avocado in the early 16th century. He described it as follows: “In the centre of the fruit is a seed like a peeled chestnut, and between this and the rind is the part which is eaten, which is abundant, and a paste similar to butter and of very good taste,”

The first written record of the word ‘avocado’ in English was by Hans Sloane in a 1696 index of Jamaican plants.

How many varieties of this plant are known?

There are over 900 varieties of avocado. They look fairly similar but come in different shades, have different amounts of flesh, different seed sizes and different flavours.

Where and how was the plant originally grown and used?

Archaeologists have found evidence of avocado consumption along the north west pacific coast of what we now call Peru dating back 15,000 years.

The people of Mesoamerica discovered that they could graft pieces of different avocado trees onto other avocado trees and could make variants with more flesh and smaller seeds by planting two different types of avocado trees close to each other. As a result certain varieties can be grown at a high altitude and others need to be grown in a warmer climate.

How do Indigenous people relate to this plant?

According to oral histories and the few books (or codices) with information about Maya and Aztec cultures, it seems that avocados held spiritual significance in some Mesoamerican cultures.

The fourteenth month in the Maya calendar is represented by an avocado glyph, "K'ank'in". Avocados are part of the name glyph of the Mayan city of Pusilhá in Belize which is known as the "Kingdom of the Avocado". Avocado trees are depicted on the Maya ruler Pacal's sarcophagus at Palenque. The Aztec city of Ahuacatlan whose name means "place where the avocado abounds".

According to Aztec myth, avocados can transfer strength to people that eat them. They were also considered an aphrodisiac.

When and how did this plant first come to Britain?

The avocado was introduced into Britain in the late 17th Century. However, it was not widely popular and mostly only eaten by the wealthy. It started to gain popularity in the early 1900s but did not really start being widely eaten until the 1990s.

Special properties

Avocados have been used to treat upset stomachs, chest pains and fatigue.

Fun facts

The avocado is a berry.

According to Nahuatl scholar Magnus Pharao Hansen, the Nahuatl word "āhuacatl" meant "the fruit of the avocado tree" and was also used as a slang term for "testicles," presumably because of the fruit's shape and because they grow in pairs.

Avocado trees can live for over 400 years.

Sainsburys were the first supermarket in the UK to start stocking avocados in 1962 and Marks & Spencer started stocking them in 1968.

The leaves on the avocado tree are poisonous, causing diarrhoea in people and can kill animals if they eat them

