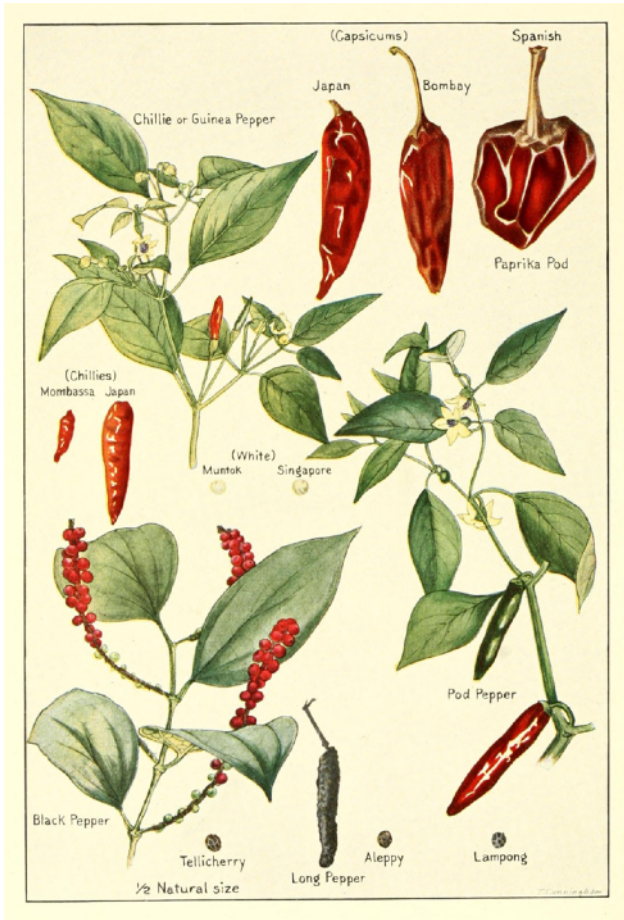


BORDER CROSSINGS

ORIGINS

BOTANY BAY LEARNING RESOURCES

Chilli



Left: Types of various peppers and chillies by their geographical locations.

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/13/Capsicum-chillies-pepper.png>

Above: Green bird's eye, yellow Madame Jeanette, red cayenne chillies.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chili_pepper#/media/File:Madame_Jeanette_and_other_chillies.jpg

What do Indigenous people call this plant?

The 'chilli' in the name chilli pepper could derive from the word Chilpochtli, Chiltecpin or Chiltepin from Nahuatl, the Aztec language. Chillies have been cultivated in the Americas since around 3000BC.

When was this plant first documented?

Christopher Columbus encountered these chillies when he discovered America, calling them "peppers" because of the similar spicy taste like the familiar peppers in Europe.

How many varieties of this plant are known?

There are about 4,000 varieties of chilli in the world. These can be divided into five Capsicum species (Capsicum annuum, Capsicum baccatum, Capsicum chinense, Capsicum frutescens and Capsicum pubescens) and a further 28 rare wild subspecies.

Where and how was the plant originally grown and used?

It is thought that chilli peppers originated in north-east and central-east Mexico. Chilli peppers have been eaten for around 9,000 years. There is evidence they were harvested in the Tehuacán plain and later cultivated in east-central Mexico around 6,000 years ago according to archaeological findings in caves in Tehuacán Valley and Ocampo caves in Tamaulipas. Traces of capsicum were found alongside those of maize and squash in these caves. There are still around 30 wild varieties found only in South America.

How do Indigenous people relate to this plant?

Chillis were often dried and ground for storage and use in cooking. Some were roasted beforehand to create different flavours.

When and how did this plant first come to Britain?

Columbus and his crew were the first Europeans to taste chilli peppers. They found them on the island of Hispaniola, the second largest Caribbean island, now known as Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The people on Hispaniola called them 'aji'. The Europeans gave them the name peppers as they reminded them of black pepper which originates from South and Southeast Asia and contains piperine which gives black pepper its hot and spicy flavour.

The seeds were imported to Spain in 1493 and their use spread to Italy and then north throughout Europe. Initially, they were not well received. They were considered too hot and too pungent. However, they were easy to grow in the warm Southern European climate and therefore cheap. Spices from the Far East were expensive and had an allure and mystery to them. Peppers became popular with the poor as they were a way to add flavour to their simple diet.

Special properties

As well as flavouring foods and drinks, the Aztecs also used chilli peppers to fumigate houses and to help cure illnesses including upset stomachs, headaches and joint pain.

Fun facts

Birds are completely unaffected by capsaicin because it targets a specific pain receptor in mammals. The seeds from chilli peppers are unaffected by the birds' digestive system and as birds can travel much further than mammals, this is great for seed dispersion. This symbiotic relationship means a wider seed dispersion and that there is less competition for resources with other chilli plants. Scientists also believe this is how chilli plants spread throughout South America and the Caribbean.

The Maya and Aztec peoples made a range of drinks using cocoa paste boiled in water. They often added fruit and spices and very often chilli to this drink called xocolatl. This was mainly drunk by the Emperor, the ruling class, religious leaders and also soldiers. It was also made into an offering for the Gods.

Resources edited by Phil Hindmarsh. Project Manager Marine Begault.

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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