

Columbus didn't discover America. People were living here for many years before Columbus came. One great thing that Columbus did was to begin the trade routes which had never been established between Europe and the Americas. Amongst the trade items were many plants and animals. Beans, carrots, wheat, horses, pigs, cows, and much more were introduced to the Americas. Corn, potatoes, tomatoes, beans, and more were brought back to Europe. How have these events affected our lives today? Look through some of the classroom activities in this section to see if you can answer that question for yourself.

Over the centuries, as people migrated from place to place, conquered new territories, and opened new trade routes, they took food crops with them spreading them from their land of origin to other areas. By the time Columbus set sail in 1492, Southern Spain grew rice and oranges that had been introduced and popularized by Arab invaders. Northern Europeans planted peas and oats that had come along with the expansion of the Roman Empire. East Africans ate mangos and eggplants carried by Persian voyagers. And across the Atlantic, North American Indians farmed corn, beans, and squash, which had been domesticated thousands of miles to the south.

Although many food plants had traveled halfway around the globe by 1492, not one food crop had crossed the Atlantic Ocean. That is why 1492 is such a crucial date in the history of the world's food supply: Columbus' voyages initiated the interchange of plants between the Eastern and Western Hemispheres, which in effect doubled the food crop resources available to peoples on both sides of the Atlantic. As Thomas Jefferson noted: "The greatest service which can be rendered to any country is to add a useful plant to its culture..." [[The Jeffersonian Cyclopeda, 1900 as quoted in Crosby's "the Columbian Voyages, the Columbian Exchange, and Their Historians\]](#)

Impressed by the novelty and abundance of New World crops, Columbus and explorers who followed him brought samples from the Americas back to the Old World. Today, tomatoes are a basic food in the Mediterranean, as chili peppers are in many parts of Asia. Pineapples flourish in the Pacific, while avocados thrive in Kenya and Israel. In Egypt, street vendors sell roasted ears of corn and sweet potatoes are snack foods in Japan.

Explorers and colonizers from the Old World added to the New World cornucopia by bringing seeds and cuttings of familiar crops with them to the Americas. The wheat fields of Nebraska and Saskatchewan, the coffee plantations of Columbia and Costa Rica, the rice fields of Louisiana and Texas, the vineyards of California and Chile, and the orange groves of Florida and Mexico have their origins in the Old World.