The Peanut

A Research Companion & Food History

From the burial jars of the Inca to the docks of Seville: how a South American legume found its way onto European tables

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Compiled from period manuscripts, botanical histories, and modern scholarly sources

Contents

I. From the Earth Beneath

The peanut (*Arachis hypogaea*) is a South American legume with a peculiar habit: after its small yellow flowers are pollinated above ground, a stalk-like structure called a peg grows downward into the soil, where the fruit develops entirely underground. This behaviour, known as geocarpy, is rare among legumes and struck every culture that encountered the plant as remarkable enough to name. The Greek-derived scientific name says it plainly: *hypogaea*, "under the earth."

The genus *Arachis* is native to the eastern side of the Andes, in what is now Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, and Brazil. The oldest known archaeological remains of peanut pods, found in Peru, have been dated to approximately 7,600 years before the present, though these may represent a wild species in early cultivation rather than the fully domesticated plant.[1] Macrofossil and starch grain evidence from the Zaña Valley in northern Peru pushes the peanut's presence in human hands back to roughly 8,500 years ago.[2]

By the time of the great pre-Columbian civilisations, the peanut was thoroughly woven into the agricultural and ritual life of South America. The Moche culture of northern Peru (c. 100–700 AD) depicted peanuts in their ceramics. The Inca, according to later accounts, used peanuts in sacrificial ceremonies and packed them into burial jars as grave goods to sustain the dead in the afterlife—a practice attested at coastal sites as early as roughly 1500 BC.[3] Tribes in central Brazil ground peanuts with maize to produce a fermented drink used in celebrations.

The plant's range extended far beyond its Andean centre of origin. By the time of European contact, peanuts were cultivated across a vast belt of the tropical and subtropical Americas: in several of the West Indian Islands, along the northeast and east coasts of Brazil, throughout the Río de la Plata basin, extensively in Peru, and as far north as Mexico. It was in the marketplace of Tenochtitlan that the Spanish conquistadors first encountered peanuts for sale, known to the Aztecs by the Nahuatl name *tlālcacahuatl*—a compound roughly meaning "earth-cacao"—from which the modern Spanish *cacahuete* descends.[4]

The peanut that arrived in the New World marketplaces was, in other words, already an old and widely distributed crop. What changed in the sixteenth century was not the plant's importance, but the audience that learned of it.

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II. The Physician of Seville

Nicolás Bautista Monardes never set foot in the Americas. Yet from his medical practice in Seville—Europe's principal gateway to the Spanish colonies—he produced what became the most widely read account of New World plants in sixteenth-century Europe. His method was simple and effective: he interviewed everyone who came back. Soldiers, merchants, Franciscan friars, royal officials, and women returning from the Indies all fed him specimens and testimony. He tested what they brought on his own patients. The result was a pharmacopoeia assembled entirely at second hand that nonetheless proved remarkably accurate.

Monardes came to medicine through family connections on both sides. His father, Nicoloso di Monardis, was an Italian bookseller settled in Seville; his mother, Ana de Alfaro, was a physician's daughter. He married into the

medical faculty as well—his wife Catalina Morales was the daughter of a Seville professor of medicine—and this network kept him at the centre of the city's medical establishment for half a century. His birth date is disputed: earlier scholarship placed it at 1493, but Francisco Guerra's archival research in 1961 argues for c. 1512, which better fits the documented dates of his university education (a bachelor's in medicine in 1533, a doctorate in 1547, both at Alcalá de Henares and Seville respectively).[5]

He was not only a physician. Monardes traded in cloth, imported drugs, and dealt in enslaved people—a combination of enterprises that eventually bankrupted him. After his wife's death in 1577 he took holy orders, and he died of a cerebral haemorrhage in 1588.[6]

What survives is the work. His *Historia medicinal de las cosas que se traen de nuestras Indias Occidentales* ("Medical History of the Things Brought from Our West Indies") was published at Seville in three expanding instalments: Part I in 1565, covering resins, purgatives, and Peruvian balsam; Part II in 1571, dedicated to Philip II, adding tobacco, sassafras, and various animal products; and the complete three-part edition in 1574, dedicated to Pope Gregory XIII. It was in this final instalment, on folios 93–94, that a modest chapter appeared on a fruit that grew beneath the ground near the River Marañón.[7]

The complete work was reissued unchanged at Seville in 1580. It would be translated into Latin, English, Italian, French, German, and Flemish, making Monardes the most widely read Spanish physician in sixteenth-century Europe. Some historians believe the book's success prompted Philip II to send the physician Francisco Hernández on a formal botanical expedition to New Spain in 1570. The plant genus *Monarda* (bee balm) was later named in Monardes' honour.

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III. Joyfull Newes

The English translation of Monardes' *Historia medicinal* was the work of John Frampton, an English merchant who had lived in Spain and spent time in the prisons of the Inquisition before returning to England. Frampton was a trader, not a scholar, and he gave the book a title calculated to sell: *Ioyfvll Nevves ovt of the Newe Founde Worlde*. The first English edition appeared in 1577, translated from the 1565 Spanish text. An enlarged edition based on the complete 1574 Spanish publication followed in 1580, and a third English printing appeared in 1596, issued by the printer Edward Allde.[8]

By publishing in the vernacular, Frampton made the work accessible not only to botanists and apothecaries but to the common reader. The strategy worked: the book circulated widely in England and contributed to a growing popular fascination with the New World as a source of marvels, both medicinal and edible.

It is in the 1574 Spanish edition and the corresponding 1580 English enlargement that the peanut makes its quiet entrance into European letters. The chapter heading in Monardes' original reads *"De la fruta que se cria debaxo de tierra"*—"Of the fruit that grows beneath the earth." Frampton rendered the passage as follows:

Of the Fruit That Groweth Under the Earth

From Joyfull Newes out of the Newe Founde Worlde, fol. 93–94 (1580 edition), translated by John Frampton from Nicolás Monardes

This fruite groweth vnder the earth, in the coaſt of the Riuer of Maronnon, and it is not in any other part of al the Indias. It is to be eaten greene and dry, and the beſte way is to toſte it. It is eaten alwaies after meates, as fruite eaten laſt of all, because it dryeth much the ſtomacke and leaueth it satisfied, but if you eate much of it, then it bringeth heauinesse to the head. It is a fruite in great reputation, as wel amongſt the Indians, as the Spaniardes, and with greate reason, for I haue eaten of them, which they haue brought mee, and they haue a good taſte. It seemeth to be a temperate fruite.

The description is brief but unmistakable: a fruit that grows underground, eaten roasted, consumed as a digestive after meals, prized by both indigenous peoples and Spaniards, and personally sampled by the author at Seville. Monardes' observation that it "dryeth much the stomacke" and "bringeth heauinesse to the head" when eaten in excess is consistent with the high oil and caloric content of the peanut. His claim that the fruit was found only along the River Marañón (the upper Amazon in present-day Peru) reflects limited geographical knowledge rather than botanical error; by 1574, peanuts were already cultivated across much of tropical America, but Monardes could only report what his informants told him.

In 1605, the Flemish botanist Charles de l'Écluse (Carolus Clusius) published a Latin translation of Monardes' passage in his *Exoticorum libri decem*, printed at Antwerp by the celebrated Plantin press. There Clusius titled the section *"Fructus sub terra nascens"*—"The fruit growing beneath the earth"—and added editorial commentary comparing it with Jean de Léry's earlier account of a similar Brazilian plant called *manobi*. Clusius expressed some doubt about whether Monardes and Léry were describing the same fruit, a question that later botanists would resolve in the affirmative: both were describing *Arachis hypogaea*.[9]

Monardes' brief chapter is now recognised as the earliest European description of the peanut to appear in a medical or botanical work distributed across the continent. It was not the first European encounter with the plant—the conquistadors had seen peanuts in Tenochtitlan decades earlier, and Portuguese traders were already carrying them to Africa—but it was the passage through which literate Europe first learned of the fruit in any detail.

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IV. A Fruit by Many Names

Few foods have accumulated as many names across as many languages as the peanut, and the variety reflects not just linguistic drift but the many separate routes by which the plant reached different cultures.

The Indigenous Names

In Nahuatl, the language of the Aztec empire, the peanut was *tlālcacahuatl*, a compound of *tlālli* (earth) and *cacahuatl* (cacao bean)—"earth-cacao," a name that registers both where it grows and what it resembles. This word gave Spanish its *cacahuete* (or *cacahuate* in Mexican usage), still the standard term in Spain today. In the Tupi languages of Brazil, the plant was known as *mandubí* or *manobi*, the name that appears in Jean de Léry's 1578 account and in Clusius's commentary. The Quechua word *inchis* or *inchic* was used in Peru, while in parts of the Caribbean the Spanish heard *maní*, a Taíno word that persists across much of Latin America.

Groundnut, Earthnut, and Ground Pea

In English, the earliest terms were descriptive translations of the plant's underground habit. "Groundnut" and "earthnut" appeared in the seventeenth century, followed by "ground pea"—a recognition that the plant was a legume, not a true nut. These terms were standard in both British and American usage through the eighteenth century; American records from the 1700s refer to peanuts as "groundnuts" or "ground peas" and note them as a food for pigs and a subject of botanical study. "Groundnut" remains the standard term in British English, as well as in Indian English, where it is the common market name for the crop.

Goober, Pindar, and the African Connection

When peanuts arrived in North America, they came largely via the Atlantic slave trade, and they brought African names with them. "Goober" (and "goober pea") derives from *nguba* in Kikongo, a Bantu language of west-central Africa. "Pindar" (also "pinder") has the same Kikongo origin and was common in the colonial American South. Both words survive in regional American English, particularly in the southeastern United States.[10]

Peanut

The word "peanut" itself is an American English coinage, first attested in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. It combines "pea" (acknowledging the legume family) with "nut" (describing the culinary use and hard shell). Some etymologists have suggested that it may partly be a folk reanalysis of "pindar," but this is uncertain. "Peanut" became the dominant American term over the course of the nineteenth century, displacing the older "groundnut" and "ground pea."[11]

Other European Names

The divergence between American and British usage—"peanut" versus "groundnut"—is part of a broader pattern. French uses *arachide*, derived from the Latin genus name. German has *Erdnuss*, literally "earth-nut." Spanish, as noted, keeps the Nahuatl *cacahuete*. The British also use the colloquial "monkey nut," particularly for peanuts sold in the shell. Each name preserves a different observation about the same plant: where it grows (ground, earth, *tlālli*), what family it belongs to (pea), what it resembles (nut, cacao), or simply its Latin classification (*Arachis*).

> **On botanical nomenclature:** When Carl Linnaeus formally classified the peanut in 1753, he named it Arachis hypogaea—combining a Latinised form of the Greek arakos (a type of legume) with hypogaea, "under the earth." Even in the language of taxonomy, the peanut's defining trait could not be escaped.

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V. The Long Road to European Tables

The peanut's journey from the Americas to the rest of the world was swift in some directions and extraordinarily slow in others. Paradoxically, the continent that first documented the plant in print—Europe—was among the last to grow and eat it in any quantity.

To Africa and Asia

Portuguese traders introduced the peanut to West Africa during the sixteenth century, where it thrived in the tropical climate and quickly became a staple crop. In several regions it substantially replaced the indigenous Bambara groundnut (*Vigna subterranea*), a related legume whose seeds also develop underground. The peanut became so deeply integrated into West African agriculture and cuisine that many later observers assumed it was native to the continent.

The same Portuguese trading networks carried the peanut eastward. By the 1570s, it was being cultivated in Chekiang Province, China, likely arriving via Portuguese traders from Brazil. Over the following centuries it spread across India, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands, valued both as a food crop and as a source of oil.[12]

The Atlantic Circuit

The peanut's route into North America was bound up with the slave trade. As the geographer Judith Carney has argued, the transatlantic traffic in enslaved people also moved crops in both directions. Peanuts, already established in West Africa, were among the provisions loaded onto slave ships because they were calorie-dense and kept well on long voyages. But Carney's central point is about agency, not logistics: it was enslaved Africans who brought the knowledge of how to grow and prepare the plant. They cultivated peanuts in kitchen gardens across the American South and wove them into the foodways they built in captivity. The American English words "goober" and "pindar" —both from Kikongo—are linguistic residues of that forced transplantation. [13]

Europe's Indifference

Monardes described the peanut in 1574. Frampton translated the description for English readers in 1580. Clusius disseminated it in scholarly Latin in 1605. And then, remarkably little happened on European tables for the next two centuries. The peanut was known, catalogued, and discussed in botanical works, but it was not widely grown or eaten in Europe itself.

The reasons are partly climatic—the peanut requires a long, warm growing season that much of northern Europe cannot provide—and partly cultural. Europe already had its own well-established nut and oil crops: almonds, walnuts, hazelnuts, and olive oil. There was no pressing nutritional gap for the peanut to fill, and its exotic origin was not enough to overcome the inertia of existing food traditions. In the American colonies, peanuts were long regarded as food for livestock and the poor, a stigma that persisted into the nineteenth century.

Actual agricultural cultivation of the peanut in Europe did not take hold until the nineteenth century, when it was introduced to the Valencia region of Spain—one of the few areas in southern Europe with a climate warm enough to support the crop. It remains a marginal product there today.[14]

The American Turning Point

In North America, the peanut's rise to popularity came in two waves. The first was the American Civil War (1861–1865), when both Union and Confederate soldiers ate peanuts as a portable, high-protein field ration, spreading familiarity with the food across regional lines. After the war, peanuts became a common street snack, sold roasted by vendors at baseball games and circuses—though poor harvesting methods left stems and debris in the product, limiting broader demand.

The second wave came at the turn of the twentieth century, driven by mechanisation and by the promotional work of agricultural scientists, most notably George Washington Carver at the Tuskegee Institute beginning in 1903. Carver championed the peanut as a rotation crop for cotton and developed hundreds of derivative products. Around the same time, John Harvey Kellogg patented a process for producing peanut butter (first attested in print in 1892), a product that would become a cornerstone of American cuisine and a significant driver of global peanut demand.

A timeline of discovery and diffusion: The table below traces the peanut's path from South American antiquity to its emergence as a global food crop.

c. 7600 BP	Oldest archaeological peanut pod remains found in Peru, possibly a wild or early-domesticated species.
c. 1500 BC	Inca funerary contexts include peanut-filled burial jars along the dry western coast of South America.
Pre-1519	Aztec vendors sell *tlālcacahuatl* in the market of Tenochtitlan; the Spanish take note.
1565	Monardes publishes Part I of *Historia medicinal* at Seville. The peanut does not appear until Part III.
1574	The complete three-part edition is published, including the peanut passage (fol. 93–94).
1577	John Frampton publishes the first English translation, *Joyfull Newes out of the Newe Founde Worlde*.
1578	Jean de Léry describes the peanut as *manobi* in his account of Brazil.
1580	Enlarged English edition of *Joyfull Newes*, now including the peanut passage.
16th c.	Portuguese traders introduce peanuts to West Africa; the crop rapidly establishes itself.
c. 1573	Peanut cultivated in Chekiang Province, China, arriving via Portuguese trade routes from Brazil.
1605	Clusius publishes a Latin translation of Monardes in *Exoticorum libri decem* (Antwerp).
17th–18th c.	Peanuts arrive in North America via the Atlantic slave trade; enslaved Africans plant them in the South.
c. 1700s	American botanists study "groundnuts" or "ground peas"; the crop is regarded as food for livestock.
c. 1800	Commercial peanut cultivation recorded in South Carolina, used for oil, food, and as a cocoa substitute.
1861–65	The American Civil War popularises peanuts as field rations among soldiers on both sides.

19th c.	Peanut cultivation introduced to Valencia, Spain—the first European agricultural production of note.
1892	"Peanut butter" first attested in American print.
1903	George Washington Carver begins peanut research at the Tuskegee Institute.

[1] R. O. Hammons, "The Origin and Early History of the Peanut," in *The Groundnut Crop*, ed. J. Smartt (Dordrecht: Springer, 1994). The 7,600-year dating comes from excavations in Peru.

[2] Hammons (1994); also D. R. Piperno and D. M. Pearsall, "The Origins of Agriculture in the Lowland Neotropics" (1998). The Zaña Valley macrofossil evidence is discussed in multiple ScienceDirect sources on peanut origin.

[3] National Peanut Board (US), "Origin & History of Peanuts"; the Inca funerary evidence is also cited in Hammons (1994).

[4] The Nahuatl name and the Tenochtitlan marketplace observation derive from Francisco Hernández, *Rerum Medicarum Novae Hispaniae Thesaurus* (compiled 1570s, published posthumously 1615–1651). Hernández described the plant as "similar to pine nuts not only in shape but also in the taste."

[5] The Biodiversity Heritage Library, Christie's, and the *Complete Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (Encyclopedia.com) all give c. 1512. Wikipedia currently gives 1493. The discrepancy is noted by Francisco Guerra, *Nicolás Bautista Monardes, su vida y su obra* (Mexico City, 1961), which corrects earlier biographical data using Seville archival records.

[6] Biographical details from Encyclopedia.com, *Complete Dictionary of Scientific Biography*, s.v. "Monardes, Nicolás Bautista," drawing on Francisco Rodríguez Marín, *La verdadera biografía del doctor Nicolás Monardes* (Madrid, 1925).

[7] Publication history of the *Historia medicinal* from Wikipedia, s.v. "Historia medicinal de las cosas que se traen de nuestras Indias Occidentales," cross-referenced with the Bonhams and Christie's auction catalogue descriptions of surviving copies.

[8] English edition details from the Wikipedia article on *Historia medicinal* and the Biodiversity Heritage Library catalogue entry for the 1596 edition.

[9] The Clusius passage and his comparison with Léry are discussed in the Polyglot Vegetarian blog ("Peanut," 2008), which provides parallel texts from Monardes' Spanish, Frampton's English, and Clusius's Latin.

[10] Etymology of "goober" and "pindar" from the National Peanut Board and "Origin & History of Peanuts" (aboutpeanuts.com). Kikongo *nguba* is the standard derivation.

[11] "Peanut" etymology from Douglas Harper, *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. "peanut"; the folk-etymology suggestion from Wiktionary, s.v. "peanut."

[12] Chekiang Province date from "Plant Trivia TimeLine: 1450–1700" (botanyincontext.com). Portuguese dissemination discussed in Hammons (1994).

[13] Judith Carney's work on the African dispersal of peanuts is cited in the Dumbarton Oaks Plant Humanities Initiative article on peanuts (JSTOR Daily, 2022).

[14] Valencia cultivation from Wikipedia, s.v. "Peanut": "Its cultivation was introduced in Europe in the 19th century through Spain, particularly Valencia, where it is still produced, albeit marginally."

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VI. Sources & Further Reading

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"Plant of the Month: Peanut." *JSTOR Daily*, December 2022. Dumbarton Oaks Plant Humanities Initiative. [Overview of peanut history with attention to the slave-trade dispersal route.]

It is a fruite in great reputation, as wel amongst the Indians,
as the Spaniardes, and with greate reason.
— Nicolás Monardes, 1574
