



Peanut: From Luxury Food to Livestock Feed

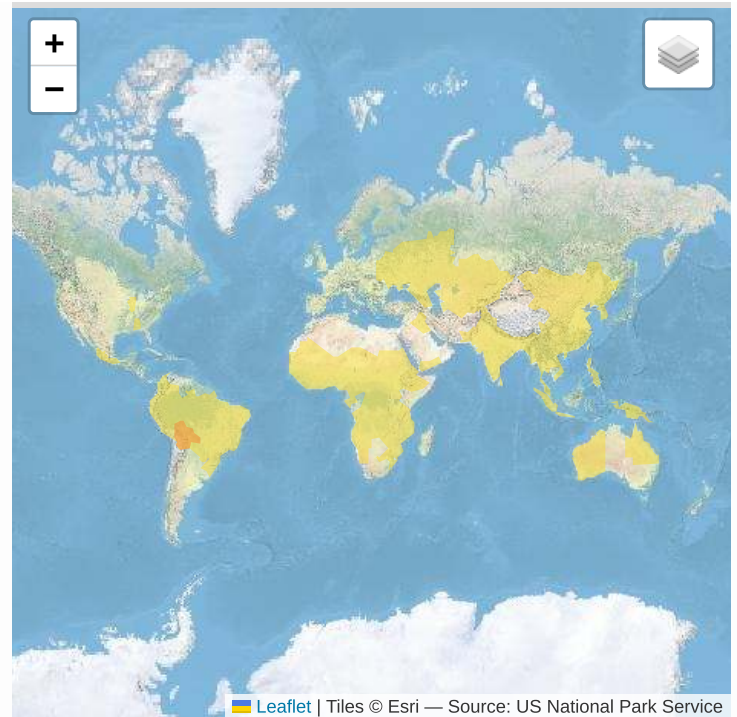
Maria Job, Elizabeth Chant, and Katherine Enright

A Nut in Name Only

Despite its English name and nutlike taste, the peanut is not a nut. This mighty legume is grown around the world for a variety of uses including human consumption, oil production, and animal feed. It also plays an important role in crop rotation due to the nitrogen-fixing bacteria in its root nodules. The taxonomic name of the cultivated peanut, *Arachis hypogaea*—hypo meaning under and gaea meaning earth—reflects this tropical plant's ingenious means of reproduction: its aerial flowers undergo fertilization above the ground and burrow into the soil to bear their fruit.



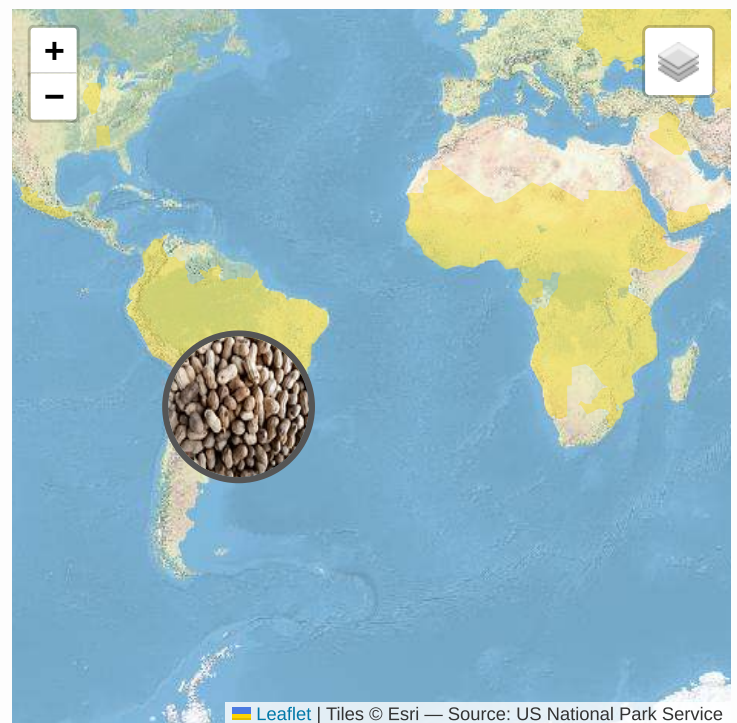
While the largest peanut-producing nations are now China, India, Nigeria, and the United States, the plant was first cultivated by Andean civilizations in South America.¹ Its migration around the world altered global food production and supply forever, rendering it one of the most successful of New World plants disseminated via the Columbian Exchange. More than just a food source, the peanut has been a protagonist in histories of global trade, slavery, and colonization and has come to be imbued with rich cultural meanings.



⋮ The distribution of *Arachis hypogaea* around the... 🔍

The Origins of Peanut Cultivation, Consumption, and Use

The peanut is one of many species of the genus *Arachis* with a native range spanning modern-day northern Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and part of Brazil. More specifically, the peanut is a natural hybrid of *two wild species* that originated in what is now Bolivia 10,000 years ago.² The exact period of peanut cultivation by Andean civilizations is unclear but domesticated peanut remains have been dated back more than 7,000 years.³ The high protein content of the peanut made it an important calorie-dense feature of the Andean diet.



⋮ The distribution of *Arachis hypogaea* around the... 🔍

In addition to being an important food source, peanuts were also a prestigious item for societal elites, and held symbolic and religious significance in pre-colonial Peru. The Moche civilization immortalized peanuts in metalwork and on ritual and funerary ceramics, and associated them with death, agricultural production, and fertility, in part because of the peanut's subterranean growth process.⁴ They were also used in competitive events and as a ceremonial offering. The high status of peanuts is perhaps best immortalized in an elaborate gold and silver necklace from the [royal tombs](#) at Sipán where the warrior-priest leaders of the Moche were buried.⁵



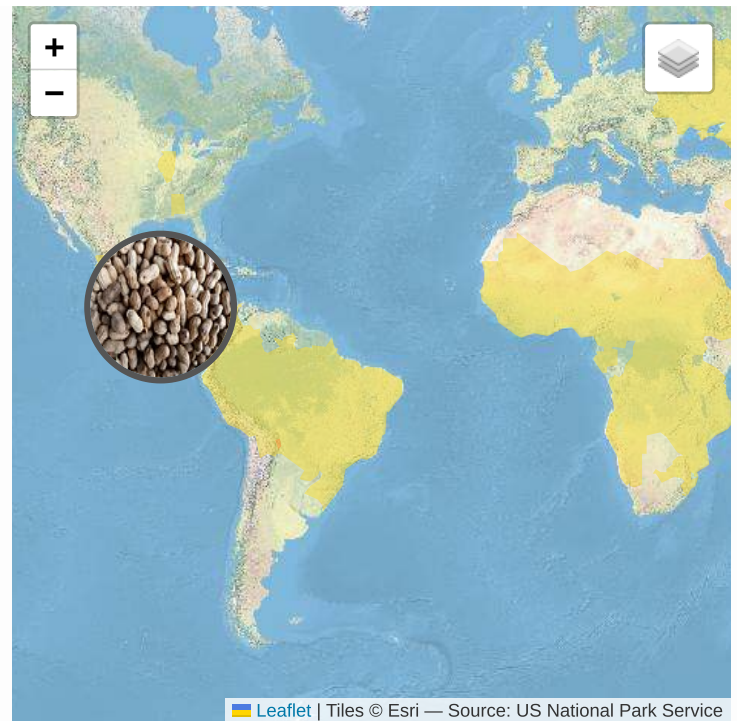
⌋ Peanut Necklace, Tomb 1, Roy... ⌋

Mestizo chronicler Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1539–1616) documented the presence of peanuts in colonial Peru. Born there and educated in Spain, [de la Vega](#) drew on direct experience and knowledge of Incan culture shared through his matrilineal relatives to offer a unique perspective on Inca cuisine. In his [1609 history of the Inca civilization](#), the author records peanuts—*ynchic*—being eaten toasted and, in combination with honey, used to make a kind of nougat. He notes peanuts cause a headache when eaten raw and that peanut oil can be extracted and used to cure many illnesses.⁶



⌋ Primera parte de los... ⌋

Peanuts gradually spread from Peru to Mesoamerica via Indigenous trade networks by the 1500s. In the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, the location of present-day Mexico City, the peanut was known as *tlalcacahuatl* from the words *tlalli* (earth) and *cacahuatl* ([cacao](#)), giving rise to one of the Spanish words for peanut, *cacahuate/cacahuete*. This suggests that Nahuatl-speaking people may have been the first humans to combine these two now-ubiquitous flavors.⁷



⋮ Tenochtitlan, the location of present-day Mexico... 🗎

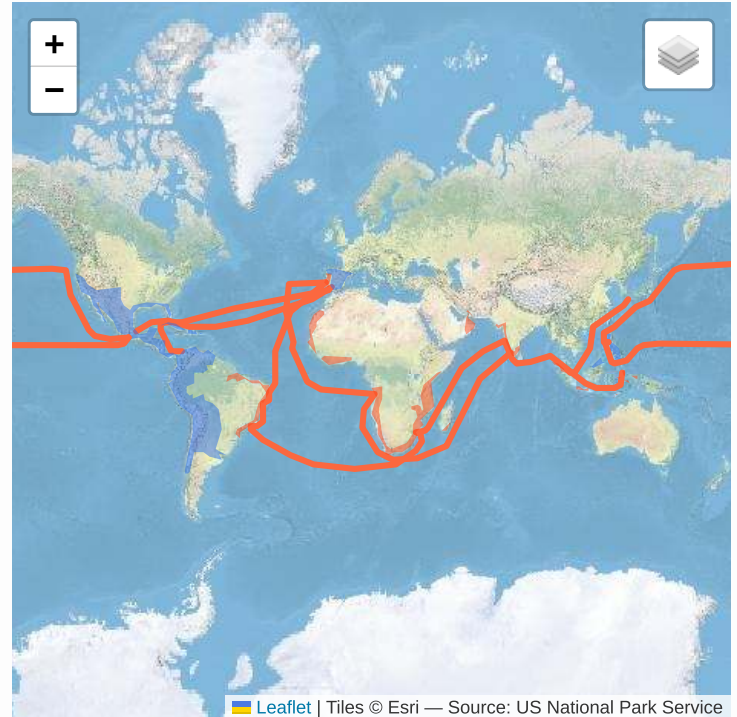
The Nahua also valued the peanut for its healing properties. Nahua methods of preparing and using the plant to treat illness are recorded in the codex [Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España \(General History of the Things of New Spain\)](#), completed in 1577. Compiled by the Spanish Friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1499–1590), in collaboration with Indigenous authors and artists, the twelve-volume codex provides a comprehensive account of Nahua culture, society, and natural history. [Book Eleven](#) describes the peanut, identified as *tlalacacahuatl* in Nahuatl, as a root that can be ground up into water and given to those with a fever, allowing them to expel the ailment through their urine.⁸



⋮ Peanut plant, Bernardino De... 🗎

Out of the Americas

The Spanish first encountered peanuts in the late fifteenth century on Hispaniola, the largest island of the West Indies, where they were called *maní* in the Indigenous Taíno language. *Maní* remains the predominant name in Latin America today, having been adopted into Spanish. Diverging from the appreciation of peanuts by many Indigenous societies, Spanish chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés (1478–1557) linked their consumption on Hispaniola to people of low social standing who were not “true Christians.”⁹ Because the Spanish associated peanuts with Hispaniola as well as the continental Americas, there was confusion about the plant’s origins until the nineteenth century, when peanut remains found in a pre-colonial tomb in Peru helped establish its origins in South America.¹⁰



Spanish galleons transported peanuts westward from the Americas to China, the Philippines, and the Pacific Islands throughout the sixteenth century. Simultaneously, the Portuguese, who encountered the legume in Brazil around 1500, transported peanuts around the world to Portuguese enclaves on the west coast of Africa. From there, it spread across the continent. The peanut was often used as sustenance for enslaved peoples as it could be stored for long periods of time and its hard outer shell helped protect it from spoilage.¹¹ From Africa, the peanut traveled to Portuguese enclaves in India and eventually to China.

⋮ Spread of peanuts in the lands claimed by the...



The first mention of peanuts in a Chinese text dates to 1503, a mere decade after Christopher Columbus' "discovery" of the Americas. The manuscript describes boiled or cooked peanuts as "delicious" and gives the origin of its Chinese name 落花生 *luo hua sheng* (commonly now just 花生 *hua sheng*), literally "born from a fallen flower," which references how the peanut fruits below ground.¹² Historical records related to Changshu county indicate that peanuts were cultivated there as early as 1538.¹³ Cultivation expanded to Guangdong by the seventeenth century and in the following century, to the Guangdong delta and Taiwan.



⋮ Spread of peanuts to China.



In China, peanuts were a luxury food served at banquets and out of reach for many until the nineteenth century. The peanut came to be imbued with cultural meanings as well, as shown in this Qing Dynasty agate carving depicting a pair of peanuts alongside red dates. The carving is a play on words: the characters for red date (枣, *zao*) and peanut (生, *sheng*), are homophones for the first two characters of the auspicious greeting 早生贵子 *zao sheng gui zi*, an encouragement for newlywed couples to soon have children.

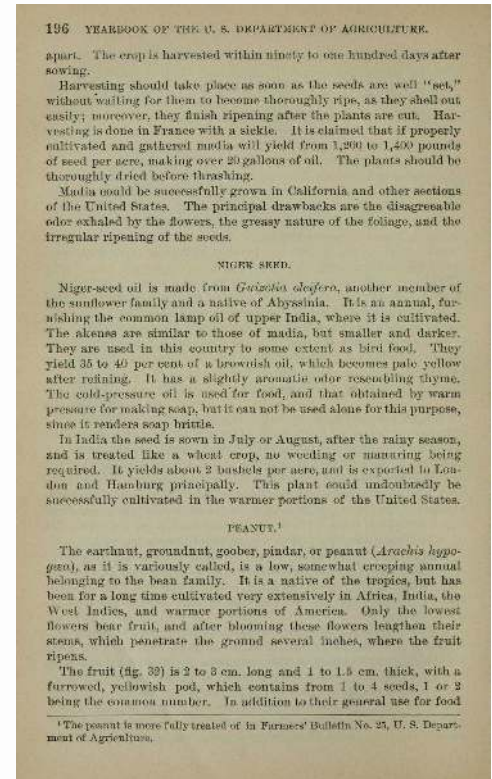


⋮ Peanuts and jujube dates, Qing dynasty, 18th...



African Diaspora Culture

Peanuts' journey north from South America was circuitous—in fact, they were introduced to North America through Africa, crossing the Atlantic in the [hulls of slave ships](#). This history is embedded in the [language of peanuts](#)—the common moniker “goober” entered American English from *nguba* in Kimbundu, a language spoken in Angola; “pinder,” another term for peanuts in the American South, derives from *mpinda* in the Kongo language.¹⁴ The adoption of these loanwords by colonial English speakers in plantation societies evidences the ingenuity and exploitation of enslaved Africans: they grew peanuts in their food plots and their knowledge of cultivation methods was in turn appropriated by slaveholders along with African names for the plant.¹⁵



⌋ Yearbook of the United States... ⌋

Mass Consumption: Peanuts as American Staple

In the early 1800s, peanuts were planted by communities of enslaved persons and were otherwise used as feed for livestock in the southern United States. It was during the Civil War that they became more widely popular among southern whites. Southerners turned to peanuts in the face of wartime food shortages, and the crop's military utility was exploited as peanut oil replaced embargoed northern whale oil as machinery lubricant.¹⁶ The popularity of peanuts at the time is commemorated in [“Goober Peas,”](#) a folk song sung by Confederate soldiers. The lyrics and music are humorously attributed to “A. Pinder” and “P. Nut,” both puns on the peanut's name.

GOOBER PEAS!

Words by A. PINDER. Music by P. NUT.

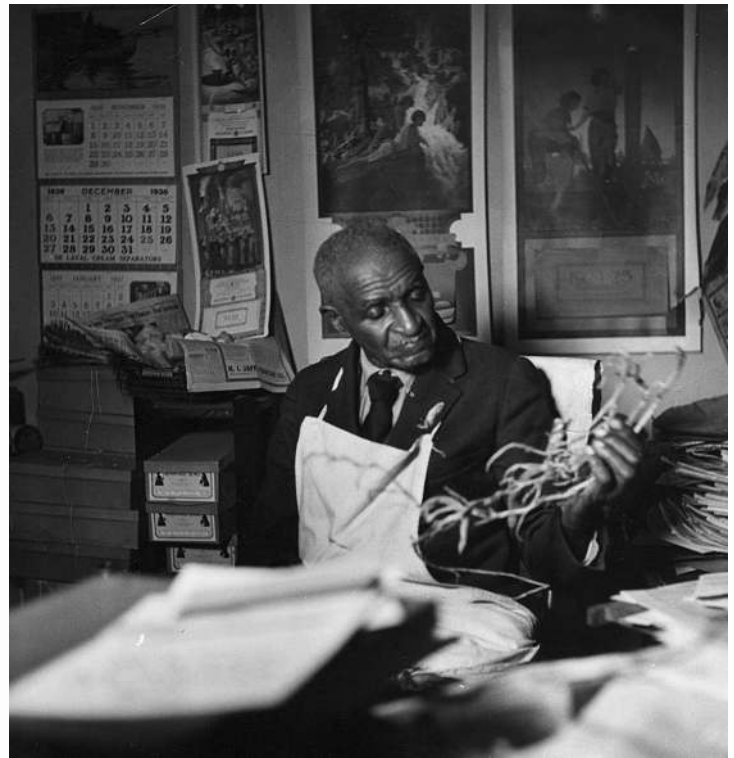
<p>Sitting by the roadside on a summer day, Chatting with my messmates, passing time away, Lying in the shadows underneath the trees, Goodness, how delicious, eating Goober Peas!</p> <p>CHORUS: Peas, peas, peas, peas, eating Goober Peas! Goodness, how delicious, eating Goober Peas!</p> <p>Tell me not of glory, chatter not of fame, Of men that live in story, winning them a name, I'm content to sit down, wholly at my ease, Free from care or sorrow, eating Goober Peas!</p> <p>When a horseman passes soldiers' have a rule To cry out at their loudest, "Mister, here's your Mule!"</p> <p>But another pleasure enchanting than these, Is wearing out your jaw teeth eating Goober Peas!</p> <p>Just before the battle the General heard a row He said the Yankees were coming, I hear their rifles now; He looked about in wonder, and what do you think he sees, The Geor-gi-a militia cracking Goober Peas!</p>	<p>I loved a girl in Georgia, she was bright and fair, And she was as beautiful as Georgia girls are; We passed the time together, what happy days were these, And in the nights we courted and eat up Goober Peas!</p> <p>Now we are here in prison and likely long to stay; They have got us closely guarded, we cannot get away; The rations they are thin, it's cold enough to freeze!</p> <p>I wish I was back in Georgia eating Goober Peas!</p> <p>I think my song has lasted almost long enough; The subject interesting the names are very ruff; But when this war is o'er and we are free from grape and fleas, We'll kiss our wives and sweethearts and gobble Goober Peas!</p>
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SOUTHERN ENTERPRISE.
Thomasville, Georgia, Wednesday, May 9, 1866.

⌋ Lyrics of the folk song “Goober Peas,” ⌋

After the war, spurred on by advances in agricultural technology, the use of peanut spread throughout the country. Instrumental to this was George Washington Carver (c.1864–1943), the pioneering [Black agricultural scientist](#) who devoted much of his career to popularizing the crop in the South. Carver, who was born into slavery in Missouri and taught at the Tuskegee Institute during his scientific career, sought to promote crops that could be planted as an alternative to cotton. Carver proposed the cultivation of peanuts as a means to rectify the widespread nutrient depletion and erosion in southern soils caused by the monoculture of cotton. As nitrogen-fixing legumes, peanuts could return nutrients to the soil as part of a crop rotation that would boost the yield of future cotton plantings.

An influential Black public figure during the age of segregation, Carver promoted peanut production on a local and a national scale.¹⁷ In 1922, he testified before Congress on behalf of peanut farmers for establishing protections for domestic peanuts against rising Chinese imports. He also invented a number of uses for peanuts, including products made from peanut oil. And a [1916 Tuskegee Institute report](#) authored by Carver illustrates his creativity in devising 105 recipes for peanut-based foods.¹⁸ Peanuts were now associated with culinary innovation and agricultural advancement—and their star was still on the rise.



⋮ Dr. George Washington Carver, Tuskegee Universit... ⋮

Peanut Butter: A Distinctly North American Foodstuff

Peanut production in the United States increased with the advent and popularization of peanut butter in North America.¹⁹ While George Washington Carver is sometimes credited with the invention of peanut butter, U.S. patents for “peanut paste” and “nut butter” began to appear in the late nineteenth century. They included recipes calling for roasting and shelling the peanuts, and then grinding the nuts until they congeal into a paste, with salt and oil as optional additions. At first a tea-time delicacy, peanut butter was marketed as a protein-packed meat replacement during the food rationing of World War I, and its utility as a cheap energy source [made it ubiquitous](#) during the Great Depression.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PEANUT BUTTER

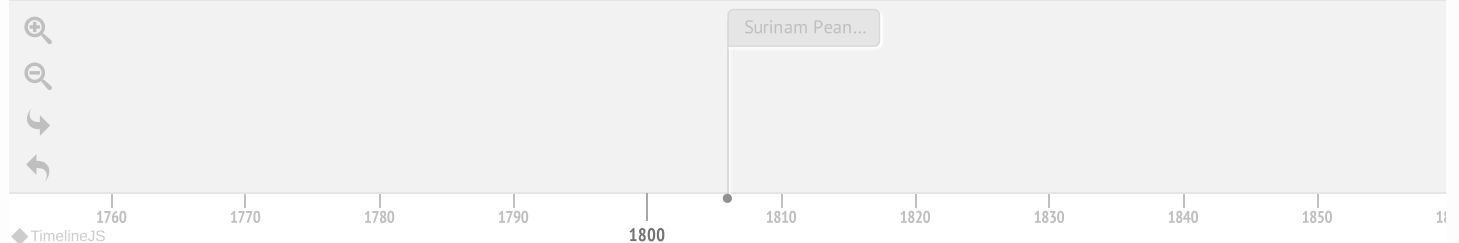


PEANUT BUTTER IN A JAR.

PiccoloNamek, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.



SURINAM PEANUT
BUTTER



Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, a series of relentless American ad campaigns marketed peanut butter as suitable for all kinds of dishes, from peanut butter sandwiches and chocolate-peanut candies to savory roasts and soups. The American Empire shaped the peanut-related foodways of its colonies as well, including the Philippines.²⁰ And the peanut is comparatively prevalent in Germany due to the historical and contemporary presence of American troops.



"See how thick
I spread it!"

© 1919, B. N. P. Co.

Flavor First—

IN Beech-Nut Peanut Butter—as in Beech-Nut Bacon, in Beech-Nut Tomato Catsup, Chili Sauce, Pork and Beans, Beech-Nut Jams, Jellies and Marmalades,

Mints and Ginger Ale—you will always find that *delicious flavor* has been made the first consideration. Order a jar of Beechnut Peanut Butter today.

BEECH-NUT PACKING CO., CANAJOHARIE, N. Y.

Beech-Nut Peanut Butter

One of the "Foods of Finest Flavor"

Selling Peanuts in Public Spaces

A characteristic feature in the history and contemporary life of peanuts is their presence in public spaces. The peanut vendor sells peanuts: roasted or boiled, shelled or de-shelled, in street carts or on the roadside, in cones of newspaper or in paper bags. It is a global practice with similarities and differences specific to geographic and temporal context. Indeed, journalist Jori Lewis has explored the significance of peanut vendors working in the United States after the Civil War. According to Lewis, vendors faced public scorn due to pejorative associations of the peanut with enslaved persons and stereotypes of race and class.²¹



Harper's weekly

In contrast to the peanut vendor's low social standing in the late nineteenth-century United States, the popularity of the street vendor in 1920s Havana is brilliantly conveyed in the song "El Manisero" ("The Peanut Vendor") by the Cuban composer and songwriter Moisés Simons.²² The 1927 composition is sung from the perspective of the seller and is a blending of the *son* and *pregón* genres. The lyrics tell of a vendor trying to tempt a housewife to buy a cone of peanuts: his repeated sales cry of "*maní, maní, maní*" is a typical feature of *pregones*. Like the song "El Manisero," fusing African and Hispanic musical traditions, the peanut vendor and peanuts in 1920s Cuba would have held a blend of different cultural associations.



1931 HITS ARCHIVE: The Peanut Vendor - Don Azpiazu...

Besides selling peanuts on streets and roadsides, vendors in the United States also were working in other public spaces like circuses, zoos, theaters, and fairs at the end of the nineteenth century. Because the vendors mainly sold peanuts in the shell, it became commonplace for purchasers to eat the delicious nuts and discard the shells on the ground. By the mid-1920s, many cities prohibited the sale of in-shell peanuts to curb littering.²³ While peanut shells were considered litter in public spaces, the hull and broken peas left over from the industrial de-shelling process were used in the preparation of livestock feed, especially during years of low-quality crops or poor prices.



Charles Frohman's...



Russell Lee, Filling bags with feed made from...

The Groundnut Scheme in East Africa

Peanuts played a critical role in the British Empire, as well, as demonstrated by the Tanganyika groundnut scheme. In 1946, British businessmen and officials [developed a plan](#) to clear vast areas of vegetation in Tanganyika for establishing a groundnut monoculture. The aim was to produce enough peanuts to supply Britain, still under government-enforced World War II rationing, with cooking oil and improve food provisions in colonial territories. Historical and environmental geographer Martin Mahoney has [explained](#) how officials repurposed military technologies to wage a “war” against nature.²⁴ Because the British government failed to adequately consider environmental conditions in Tanganyika, crops did not yield as expected and the project was abandoned in 1951.

Multispecies Consumption

Humans and livestock are not the only consumers of the peanut plant for its nutrients. Insects, fungi, and bacteria feed on peanut foliage, subterranean parts, and pods. According to National Fertilizer Association [symposium proceedings](#) published in 1951, the “Indian meal moth, almond moth, saw-toothed grain beetle, [and] flour beetles” were pests found in the southeastern United States that consumed peanuts when they were in storage.²⁵ Today peanut insect pests cause crop damage worldwide, posing a risk to the food security and foodways of many. To safeguard world peanut production, the Global Crop Diversity Trust has developed a [conservation strategy](#) with recommendations for protecting the peanut and its wild relatives from pests, diseases, and climate change.²⁶

No Meager Legume

Despite the use of the word [peanut](#) to denote a small or meager amount in the English language, we have seen over the course of this essay that the peanut has a rich history that is intricately tied to histories of global trade, slavery, and colonization. From luxury food to livestock feed, the social, cultural, and economic life of this legume has taken on many incarnations. Yet its importance to humans and its ecosystems is hard to overstate. The peanut plant heals and replenishes soils and has therefore been cultivated as a global environmental intervention method to maintain soil health. Highly nutritious and protein-packed, it is beneficial to the many life-forms that consume it—including to humans in their varied culinary preparations.



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Explore the cultural histories of plants and their influence on human societies