Black-Eyed Pea: Crop, Culture, Class

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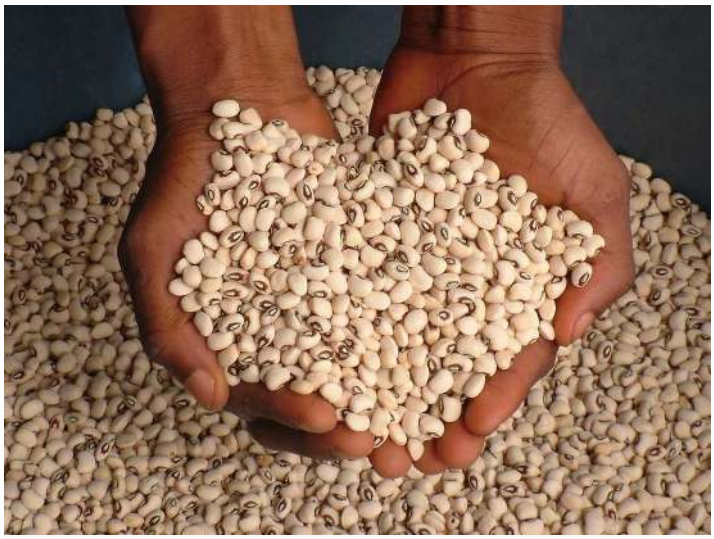
A Food Source and So Much More

While the black-eyed pea, or cowpea, has a global history stretching back millennia, its social and cultural significance has changed over time. A staple crop in Africa, revered by some peoples as a symbol of luck and fertility worthy of offering to the deities, within Europe it was considered solely as a humble food for laborers. In the Americas, too, the bean was a marker of class and culture, as it was mainly an important food source for enslaved peoples. Modern-day cuisine the world over embraces the black-eyed pea as a food rich in culture and history as well as a delicious source of innovative dishes that celebrate new traditions. The black-eyed pea is a powerful reminder of just how intertwined human identity is with the plants we eat.



Nigeria Cowpea fro F IITA

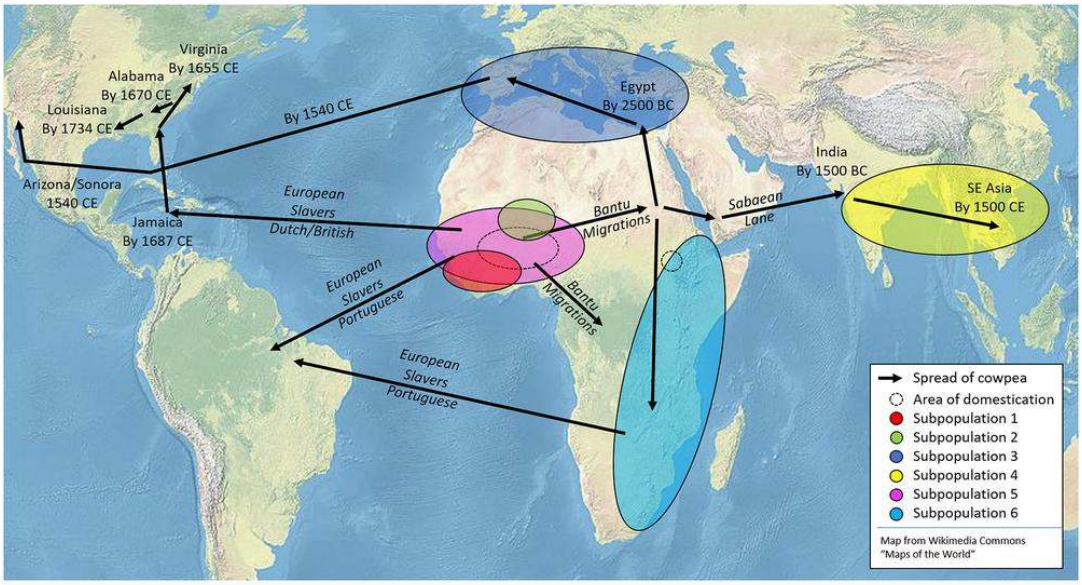
Wild cowpea flowers (6930710085)

Field of Vigna unguiculata

Vigna unguiculata nodules1…

Growth, Domestication, and Mobility

Black-eyed peas (*Vigna unguiculata*) are leguminous plants that grow best in semi-arid conditions but can thrive in poor soils with little help. They are heat-loving and drought-tolerant, and grow quickly, often giving a harvest of beans within 100 days. The ease of growth and usefulness of this crop contributed to its spread from West and East Africa to Egypt by circa 2500 BCE and to the Mediterranean and the Indian subcontinent by 1500 BCE. Archaeological and genetic evidence show that West Africans domesticated wild relatives of the plant at least 6,000 years ago.[1] Because of their quick maturing and reliability, black-eyed peas are an important part of mixed food systems: wild gathering, hunting, fishing, and aquaculture, keeping small livestock, and/or building larger herds, agroforestry, and crop cultivation. Diverse specializations protect the community by relying on different foods at different times of the year and ensuring no single crop failure will cause a famine.[2]



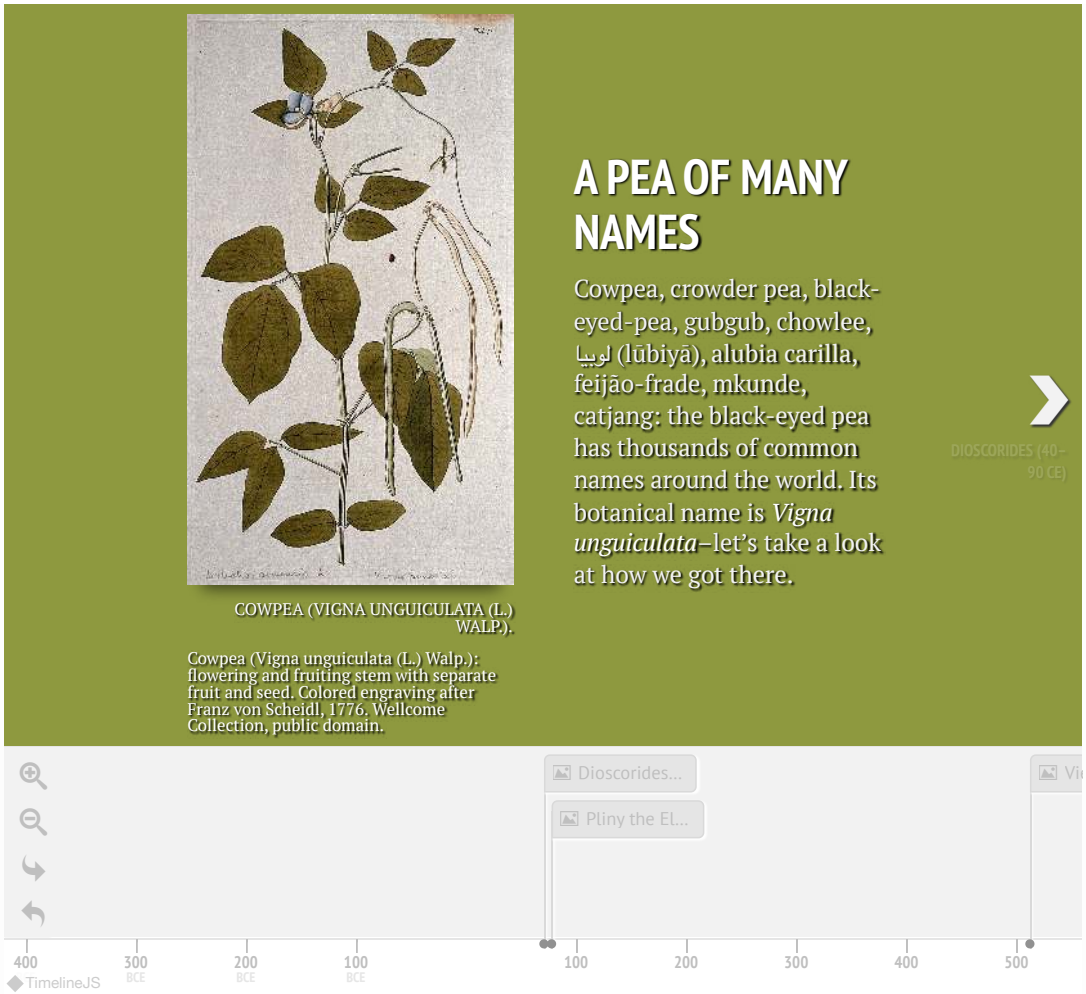
Proposed spread of cowpea from its origins of domestication in Africa

Cultural Perceptions in Europe

Since classical antiquity, the black-eyed pea has been a cultural marker of those who lacked social status in European societies. A stigma surrounding dried foods impinged the reputation of the bean and its eaters: while wealthy and socially powerful individuals could afford fresh foods, peasants relied upon cheaper dried foods. The beans were shelled, dried, and used in humble soups, though in its fresh green form the black-eyed pea apparently made a delicious dessert served in Sparta.[3] The imbrication of class, culture, and food is apparent, for example, in ancient Greek and Roman floor mosaics that depict food scraps strewn across a floor after a lavish banquet. In perhaps the most famous example of the unswept floor genre, seen here, lobster shells, olive pits, partially eaten fish, and nuts litter the ground, but nary a bean is to be found.

Sosus of Pergamon, after, Banquet leftovers, or Unswept Floor, early 2nd CE, mosaic, 4.05 x 0.41 m,…

Authors of the ancient world have described black-eyed peas in accounts of plants and nature. The Roman chronicler Pliny the Elder (23/24–79 CE) wrote that priests should avoid eating the food for fear its rough nature would upset their delicate constitutions. He also notes that Pythagoras (c.570–c.495 BCE) and his followers did not eat black-eyed peas because they "believed the souls of the dead to be contained within" the dried beans.[4] This belief may have been informed by some cultural groups in Africa that understood the black eye of the pea as the watchful presence of a supreme deity.[5] Such accounts, together with later botanical texts expressing ever-changing ideas of the bean's origins and classification, demonstrate a long confusion regarding the plant's common and Latin names in Europe.[6] They also provide a wealth of information about the cultural and social role played by the bean in the European context.



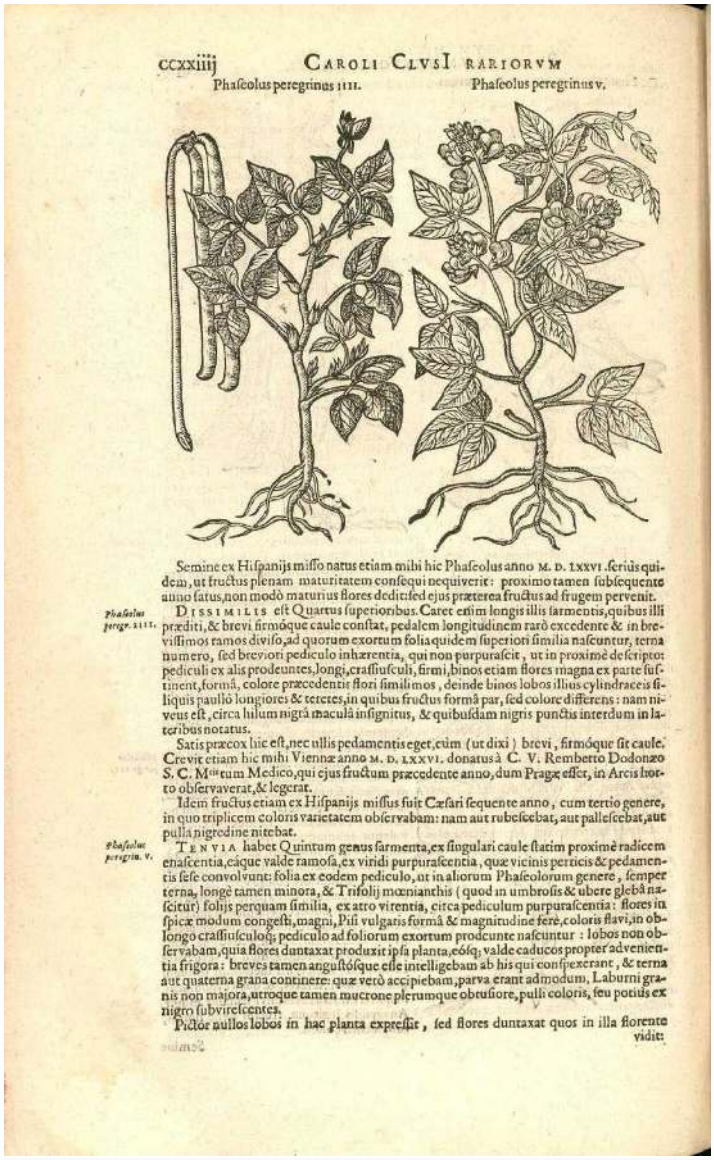
Records of black-eyed pea consumption and use within Europe during the Middle Ages are relatively scarce. Understood as a food for peasants and livestock, black-eyed peas would have been considered subject matter too lowly for inclusion in the annals of history. Throughout the early modern period, the dried bean continued to be associated with persons of low social standing. But by the late sixteenth century, the bean seemed at least worthy of representation. In the Italian artist Annibale Carracci's (1560–1609) painting *The Bean Eater*, from circa 1590, the artist's brush strokes depict a man and his bowl of black-eyed peas, visually articulating their mutual low standing. Even though the beans had been a vital part of the Mediterranean diet and culture for centuries, they are here presented as both marginal and familiar.

Annibale Carracci, The Bean Eater, 1580–90, oil on canvas, 57 …

In contrast, many more artists took inspiration from the green pea—be it the leaves, delicate blossoms, or sinuous tendril-filled vines—which became an emblem for love, fertility, and even lust. Verdant green peas were considered domestic to Europe, and served the elite not only for food, but for decorating their homes and gardens.

Peas and Beans in Early Modern Texts and Images

Visual representations of black-eyed peas and other varieties of beans and peas shaped European understanding of the plant. Beginning in the sixteenth century, the dramatic rise in the production and circulation of printed texts with images, such as herbals and natural histories, reinforced the codification of plants based on their geographic origins. Unprecedented global travel also formed European ideas about the ways in which close observation of the natural world could reveal the domestic or foreign origins of a person, plant, or animal. One result of this was a shift in European attitudes toward the black-eyed pea.



CCXXIIIIj CAROLI CLVSI RARIORVM

Phaſeolus peregrinus IIII. Phaſeolus peregrinus V.

Semine ex Hiſpanijs miſſo natus etiam mihi hic Phaſeolus anno M. D. LXXVI. ſeriùs quidem, ut fructus plenam maturitatem conſequi nequiverit: proximo tamen ſubſequente anno ſatus, non modò maturius flores dedit: ſed ejus præterea fructus ad frugem pervenit.

Phaſeolus peregr. IIII. DISSIMILIS eſt Quartus ſuperioribus. Caret enim longis illis ſarmentis, quibus illi præditi, & brevi firmóque caule conſtat, pedalem longitudinem rarò excedente & in breviſſimos ramos diviſo, ad quorum exortum folia quidem ſuperiori ſimilia naſcuntur, terna numero, ſed breviori pediculo inhærentia, qui non purpuraſcit, ut in proximè deſcripto: pediculi ex alis prodeuntes, longi, craſſiuſculi, firmi, binos etiam flores magna ex parte ſuſtinent, formâ, colore præcedentis flori ſimilimos, deinde binos lobos illius cylindraceis ſiliquis paullò longiores & teretes, in quibus fructus formâ par, ſed colore differens: nam niveus eſt, circa hilum nigrâ maculâ inſignitus, & quibuſdam nigris punctis interdum in lateribus notatus.

Satis præcox hic eſt, nec ullis pedamentis eget, cùm (ut dixi) brevi, firmóque ſit caule. Crevit etiam hic mihi Viennæ anno M. D. LXXVI. donatus à C. V. Remberto Dodonæo S. C. M^te^ tum Medico, qui ejus fructum præcedente anno, dum Pragæ eſſet, in Arcis horto obſervaverat, & legerat.

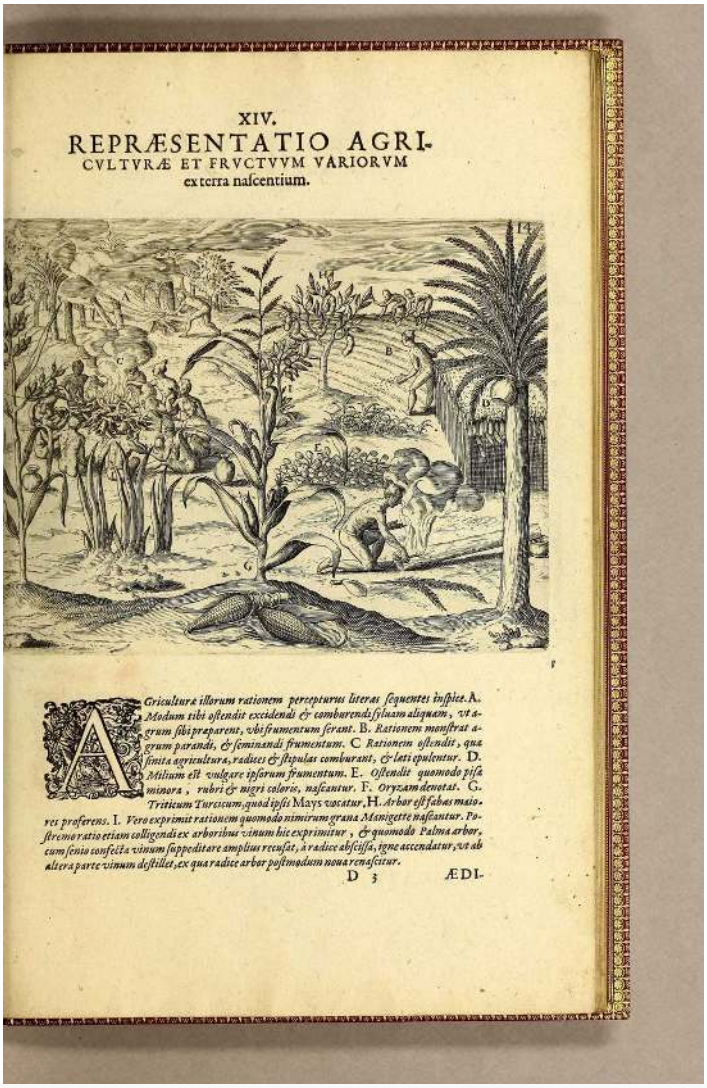
Idem fructus etiam ex Hiſpanijs miſſus fuit Cæſari ſequente anno, cum tertio genere, in quo triplicem coloris varietatem obſervabam: nam aut rubeſcebat, aut palleſcebat, aut pulla nigredine nitebat.

Phaſeolus peregrin. V. TENVIA habet Quintum genus ſarmenta, ex ſingulari caule ſtatim proximè radicem enaſcentia, eáque valde ramoſa, ex viridi purpuraſcentia, quæ vicinis perticis & pedamentis ſeſe convolvunt: folia ex eodem pediculo, ut in aliorum Phaſeolorum genere, ſemper terna, longè tamen minora, & Trifolij mœnianthis (quod in umbroſis & ubere glebâ naſcitur) foliis perquam ſimilia, ex atro virentia, circa pediculum purpuraſcentia: flores in ſpicæ modum congeſti, magni, Piſi vulgaris formâ & magnitudine ferè, coloris flavi, in oblongo craſſiuſculoq; pediculo ad foliorum exortum producunte naſcuntur: lobos non obſervabam, quia flores duntaxat produxit ipſa planta, eóſq; valde caducos propter adventia frigora: breves tamen anguſtóſque eſſe intelligebam ab his qui conſpexerant, & terna aut quaterna grana continere: quæ verò accipiebam, parva erant admodum, Laburni granis non majora, utroque tamen mucrone plerumque obtuſiore, pulli coloris, ſeu potius ex nigro ſubvireſcentes.

Pictor nullos lobos in hac planta expreſſit, ſed flores duntaxat quos in illa florente vidit:

Phaseolus peregrinus IIII, Carolus Clusius, Rariorum Plantarum…

Despite the millennia-old European presence of the black-eyed pea, it was now understood in Europe as an itinerant body within a Eurocentric taxonomy of plants. European explorers visiting Africa, Asia, and the Americas reinforced this idea. Their observations, often reported in books, were soon taken throughout Europe as factual. For example, Dutch trader and explorer Pieter de Marees' 1602 book about West Africa includes an illustration of the black-eyed pea in an idealized landscape alongside people and other plants.[7]


XIV.
REPRÆSENTATIO AGRI-
CVLTVRÆ ET FRVCTVVM VARIORVM
ex terra nascentium.

Agricultura illorum rationem percepturus literas sequentes inspice. A. Modum tibi ostendit excidendi & comburendi syluam aliquam, vt agrum sibi præparent, vbi frumentum serant. B. Rationem monstrat agrum parandi, & seminandi frumentum. C Rationem ostendit, qua finita agricultura, radices & stipulas comburant, & leti opulentur. D. Milium est vulgare ipsorum frumentum. E. Ostendit quomodo pisa minora, rubri & nigri coloris, nascantur. F. Oryzam denotat. G. Triticum Turcicum, quod ipsis Mays vocatur, H. Arbor est fabas maiores proferens. I. Vero exprimit rationem quomodo nimirum grana Manigette nascantur. Postremo ratio etiam colligendi ex arboribus vinum hic exprimitur, & quomodo Palma arbor, cum senio confecta vinum suppeditare amplius recusat, a radice abscissa, igne accendatur, vt ab altera parte vinum destillet, ex qua radice arbor postmodum noua renascitur.

D 3 ÆDI-

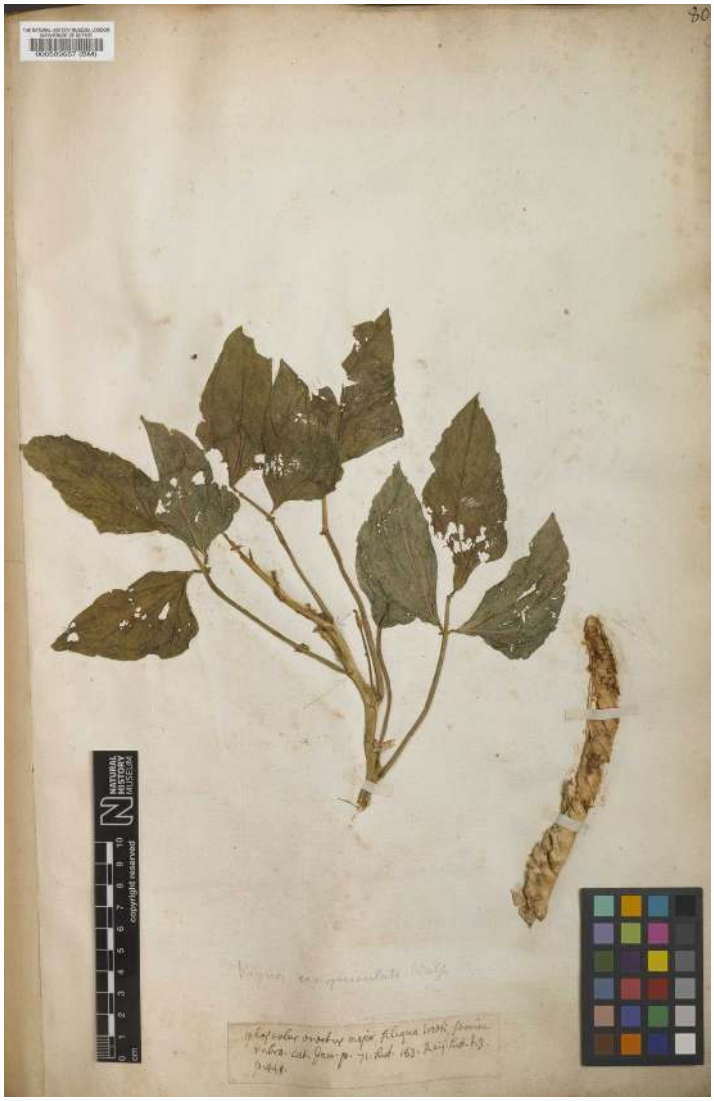
The black-eyed pea is labeled as letter 'e'. Indiae Orientalis pars…

The European perspective is not the only early modern view we have on the black-eyed pea. Written records of the bean appear in the sixteenth century in China, where it is noted in the Ming Dynasty *Compendium of Materia Medica* as being a cure for flatulence and for kidney problems.[8] And a beautiful illustration of the “cowpea” featured in the 30-volume Japanese agricultural encyclopaedia *Seikei Zuetsu*, published in 1804, shows how far the black-eyed pea had spread and how its usefulness had been welcomed into many agricultural traditions.

Cowpea [Vigna unguiculata (L.) Walp.], Seikei Zuetsu, vol. 18,…

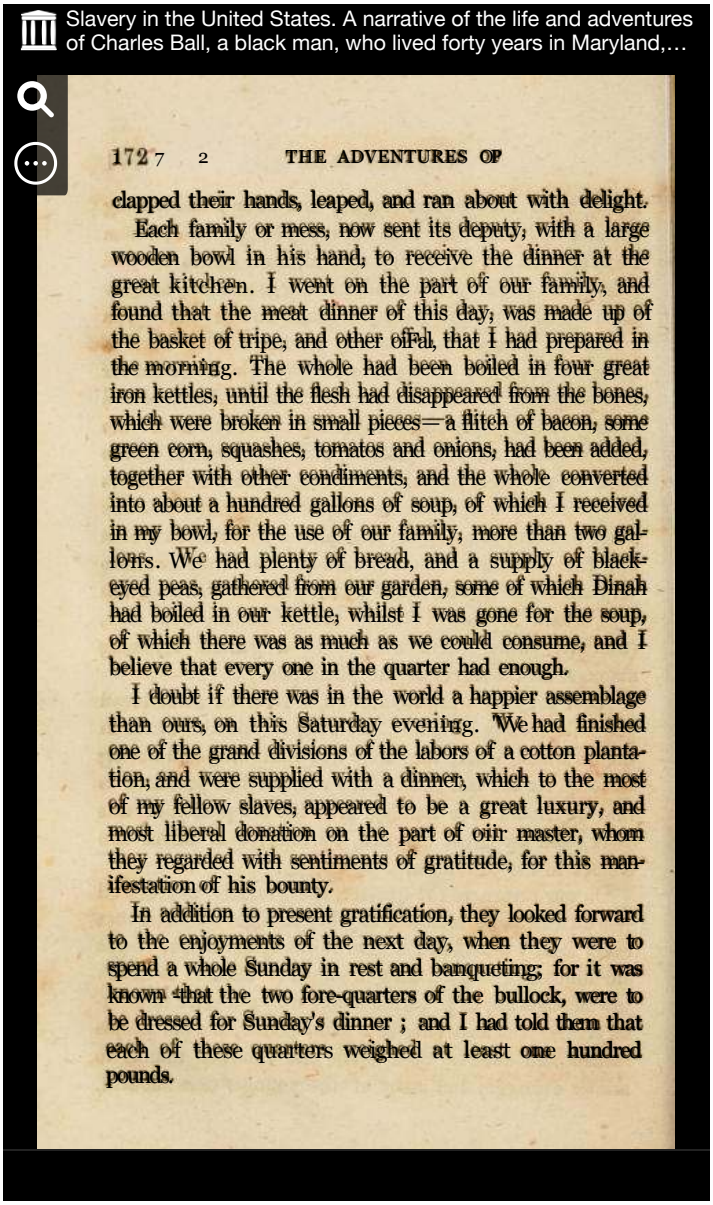
Food, Culture, and Colonialism

The black-eyed pea, millet, yams, and many other staple foods of the American tropics have African origins. European traders on the coast of West Africa filled hundreds of thousands of vessels with 10 to 12 million captives over the centuries of the transatlantic slave trade.[9] These vessels carried humans-as-commodities as well as the foodstuffs needed for an average voyage of 60 to 80 days.[10] Dry legumes, like black-eyed peas, hyacinth beans, and bambara groundnuts, were staple foods cooked into gruel during the Middle Passage. Leftover stocks then accompanied captives as they were dispersed throughout the Americas and the Caribbean.[11] In Jamaica around 1687, the English physician, naturalist, and planter Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753) recorded the presence of the black-eyed pea and extracted a plant to create this herbarium specimen.[12]

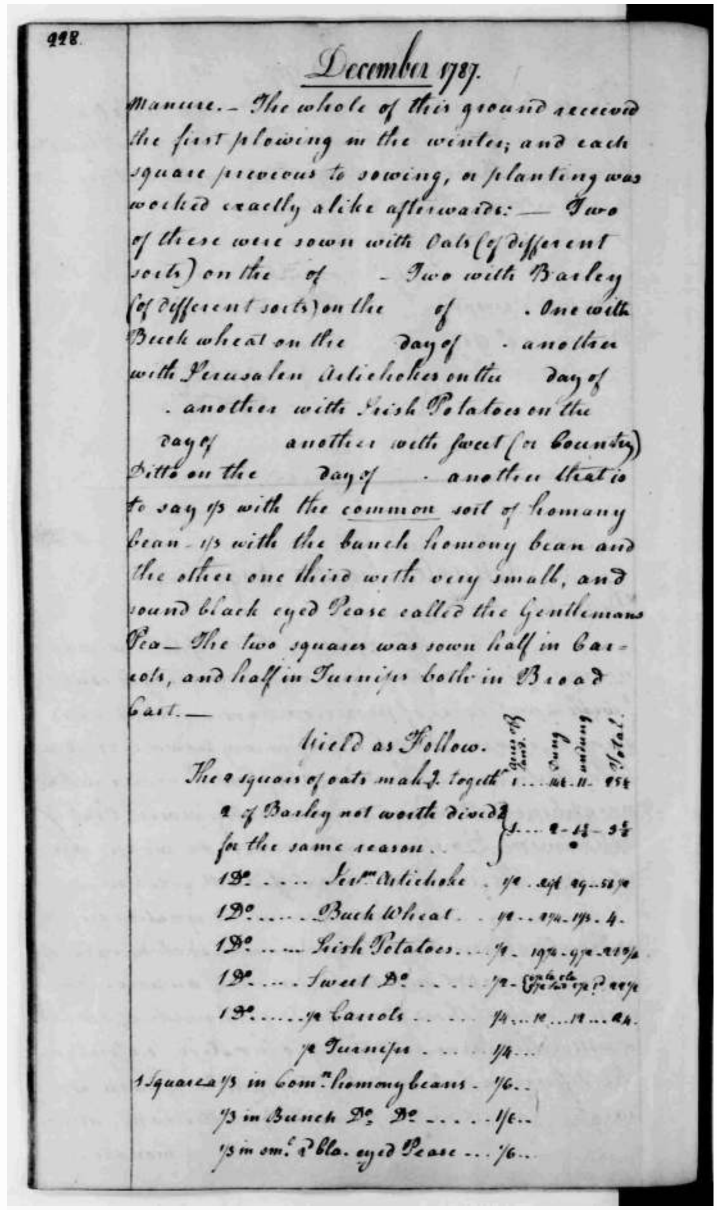


Filed as Dolichos unguiculatus L. [family FABACEAE:…

In the southern United States, enslaved peoples cultivated black-eyed peas as a crop largely for livestock.[13] However, it was also a food served to them as well as a fixture in their kitchen gardens. Numerous firsthand accounts of enslaved peoples refer to black-eyed peas. In his 1837 memoir, Charles Ball (1780–unknown) recalls, “We had plenty of bread, and a supply of black-eyed peas, gathered from our garden, some of which [were] boiled in our kettle.”[14] Francis Fedric wrote of the bean, “The dinner [of enslaved persons] consists generally of black-eyed peas soup, as it is called. About a quart of peas is boiled in a large pan, and a small piece of meat, just to flavour the soup, is put into the pan. The next day it would be bean soup…served out to the men and women in bowls; but the children feed like pigs out of troughs.”[15] Black-eyed peas also held special cultural significance to enslaved Africans, serving for many as a marker of auspicious occasions, luck, and fertility.



Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) and George Washington (1732–1799) both had black-eyed peas planted on their expansive plantations, Monticello and Mount Vernon, respectively. Washington corresponded with friends and acquaintances about the plant in a 1787 letter, in which he writes, “small, and round black eyed Pease called the Gentlemans Pea.”[16] Jefferson considered the cultivation of black-eyed peas a pursuit worthy of a gentleman, harkening back to European traditions that placed greater social and cultural status on green peas. He held yearly pea growing contests, with the first man to produce a fresh pea required to host a dinner for other gentlemen in the area.



228.

December 1787.

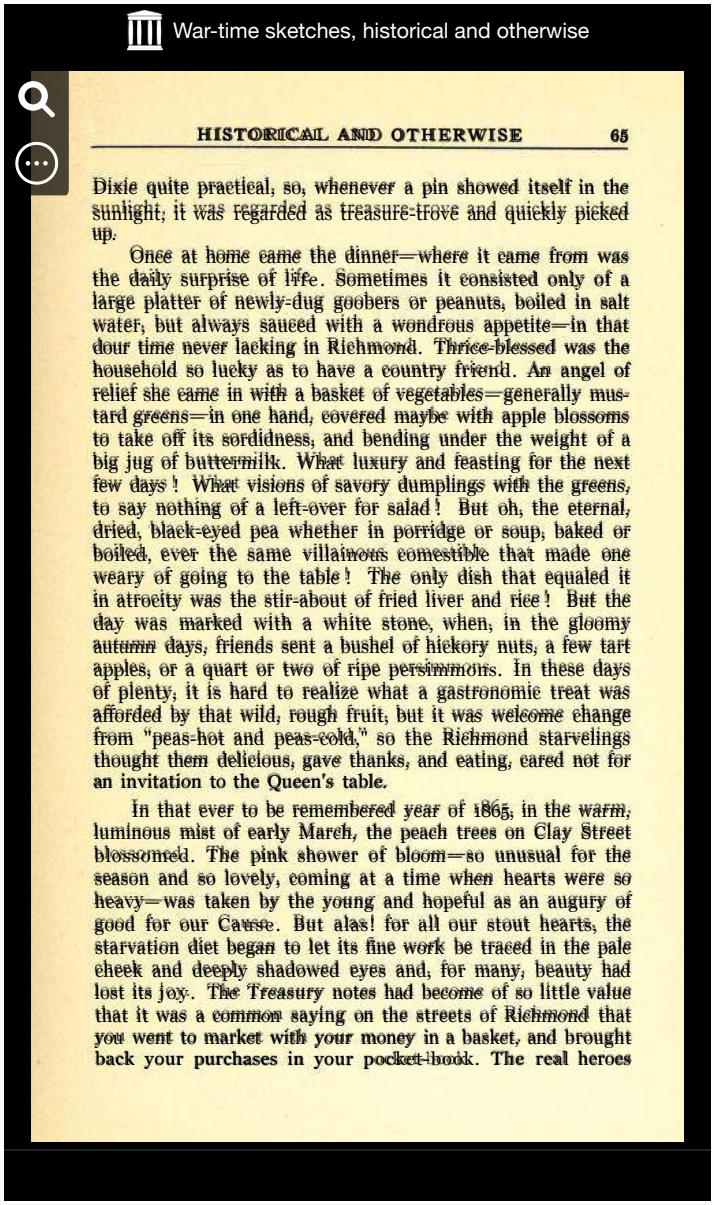
manure.— The whole of this ground received the first plowing in the winter; and each square previous to sowing, or planting was worked exactly alike afterwards:— Two of these were sown with Oats (of different sorts) on the of — Two with Barley (of different sorts) on the of . One with Buck wheat on the day of . another with Jerusalem Artichokes on the day of . another with Irish Potatoes on the day of another with sweet (or Country) Ditto on the day of . another that is to say 1/3 with the common sort of homany bean—1/3 with the bunch homony bean and the other one third with very small, and round black eyed Pease called the Gentlemans Pea— The two squares was sown half in Carrots, and half in Turnips both in Broad Cast.—

Yield as Follow.

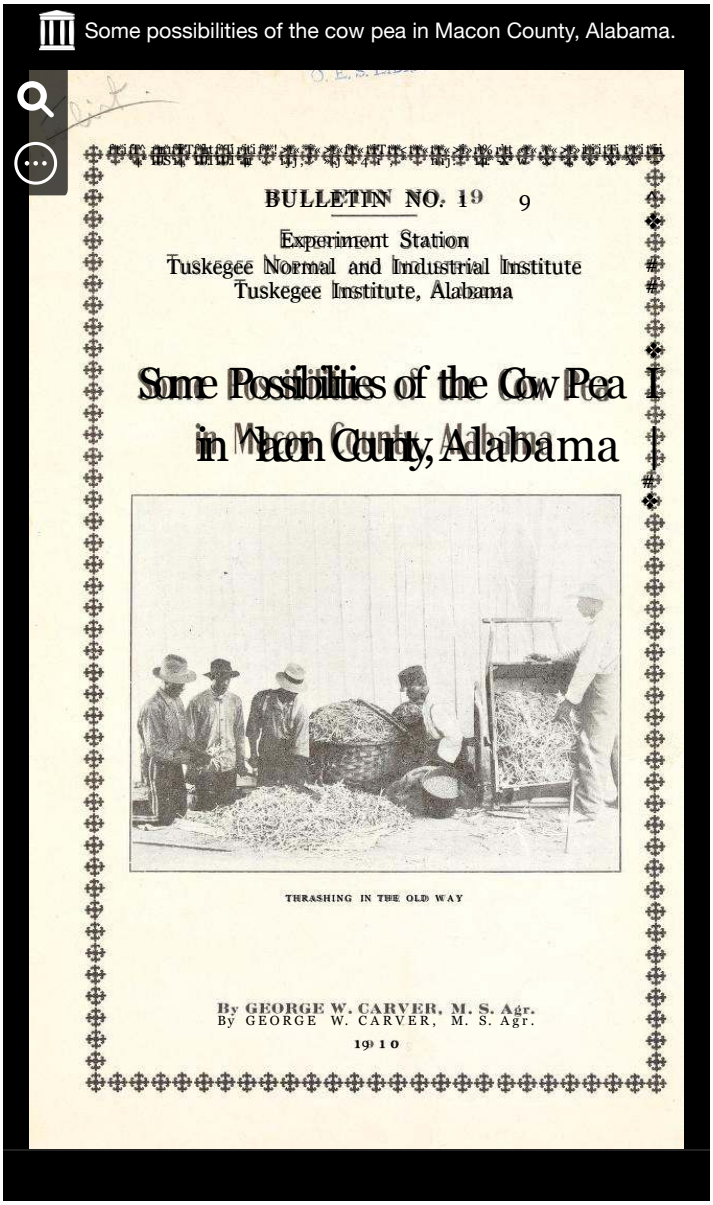
The 2 squares of oats made togeth[r] ...
2 of Barley not worth dividg for the same season ...
1 D° .... Jerus[m] Artichoke ...
1 D° ..... Buck Wheat ...
1 D° ...... Irish Potatoes ...
1 D° .... Sweet D° ...
1 D° ..... 1/2 Carrots ...
1/2 Turnips ...
1 Square 1/3 in Com[n] homony beans ...
1/3 in Bunch D° D° ...
1/3 in sm[l] & bla. eyed Pease ...

Letter from George Washington to Charles Carter, 1787,…

During the Civil War, because the North associated black-eyed peas with the practice of slavery, they were considered undesirable. However, they remained an important food in the South, so much so that some tired of their ubiquity. In Adelaide Stuart Dimitry's memoirs of the war years (she became the historian of the Stonewall Jackson Chapter of the New Orleans United Daughters of the Confederacy), she notes that while food was often hard to come by, the black-eyed pea remained a reliable—to the point of tiresome—meal. She recalls: "Once at home came the dinner-where it came from was the daily surprise of life. Sometimes it consisted only of a large platter of newly-dug goobers or peanuts, boiled in salt water, but always sauced with a wondrous appetite—in that dour time never lacking in Richmond… But oh, the eternal, dried, black-eyed pea whether in porridge or soup, baked or boiled, ever the same villainous comestible that made one weary of going to the table!"[17]



In the late nineteenth century, American subsistence farmers were encouraged to grow the black-eyed pea even if their local climate meant they did not get an abundant crop. Its usefulness as a soil improver, for erosion control, and as a nutritious fodder for livestock made that this easy-to-grow crop a valuable addition to the farming landscape. George Washington Carver (c.1864–1943), the noted American scientist and innovative proponent of crop rotation, urged farmers in the American South to plant black-eyed peas to help replenish soil depleted by cotton farming. He also believed that this easily grown crop could help lift formerly enslaved peoples out of systemically reinforced poverty. He wrote of the plant: “The cow pea is rightfully looked upon by many as the poor man’s bank or mortgage-lifter… It is a matter of much regret that every colored farmer in Macon County does not plant at least three acres in peas.”[18]



British Colonial Botany

The black-eyed pea's global journey is well documented in the Economic Botany Collection of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Although the plant was not grown as a crop in Britain (it usually being far too cold and wet), Kew's holdings demonstrate that it was widely collected and studied in the nineteenth century as a useful plant from across the colonial world. The samples were collected from Niger (seed), India (seed), China (seeds), and Japan (food). They were also obtained from imperial exhibitions where plant products were displayed, as well as from colonial expeditions, including that of Scottish explorer and naturalist Dr. William Balfour Baikie's (1825–1864) Niger Expedition of 1859.

Imperial Federation Map of the World

Culinary History and Cultural Celebrations

Today, black-eyed peas are grown commercially in at least 33 countries, reflecting the widespread embrace of the bean among geographically disparate peoples, places, and cultures.[19] As acclaimed food historian and chef Michael W. Twitty points out: "Very few people in the modern West eat one cuisine or live within one culinary construct," but rather enjoy a multiplicity of culinary histories.[20] Twitty coined the term "identity cooking" to characterize "how we construct complex identities and then express them through how we eat," an idea that is useful for any discussion of food as widely used across culinary traditions as black-eyed peas.[21]

A feast of African-American culinary contributions, baked into the…

Black-eyed peas are a staple of the Southern American diet and an iconic component of African American culinary history. The beans are key ingredients for everything from stews to salads to savory bean and rice dishes, but perhaps they are most known for their association with New Year's celebrations. Hoppin' John, a popular rice, bean, and pork dish that is thought to bring good luck and prosperity, is an absolute must for any modern Southerner on New Year's Day. It is often served with greens to symbolize wealth.[22] Thiebou niebe, a classic Senegalese dish of black-eyed peas, rice, and ham, may be the basis for the recipe.[23]

Tiebou yapp niébé

Hoppin' John's origins are from brutal conditions of American plantations. Enslaved workers grew black-eyed peas and other African crops in their subsistence gardens outside the long hours they were forced to labor in their enslaver's fields. Additionally, enslaved women often had to cook for the planter's family as well as their own. As a result, they created new meals from West African recipes and the crops and foods they had access to. White southerners at first saw black-eyed peas as a lowly food meant to feed livestock and the enslaved. To them, the beans fit in alongside the pork scraps used to cook Hoppin' John.[24] However, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, white women began including these recipes in their homemaker cookbooks, often without crediting the women who pioneered them.[25]

Hoppin' John at Brenda's Meat & Three…

Hoppin John

Hoppin' John

Brazil's national dish, *feijoada completa*, has a similar origin story to Hoppin' John. Enslaved West Africans on plantations in colonial Brazil developed *feijoada*, a stew made with black beans and scrap pork.[26] It was a meal of necessity for workers as it used the food on hand and could be left simmering unattended during the long day's work.[27] Today, simple bean and rice dishes are a national staple, but *feijoada completa* is a celebratory meal for every sector of society, taking days to prepare and requiring higher quality meat, collard greens, rice, orange slices, and manioc flour (derived from cassava).[28] For both *feijoada completa* and Hoppin' John, what was originally a means for survival has become a meal symbolizing prosperity and for celebration, as well as a symbol of unity across racial lines. However, there is still much tension in questions of representation, ownership, class, race and identity in Southern food and Soul Food, with white perspectives usually being unjustly privileged over Black ones.[29]

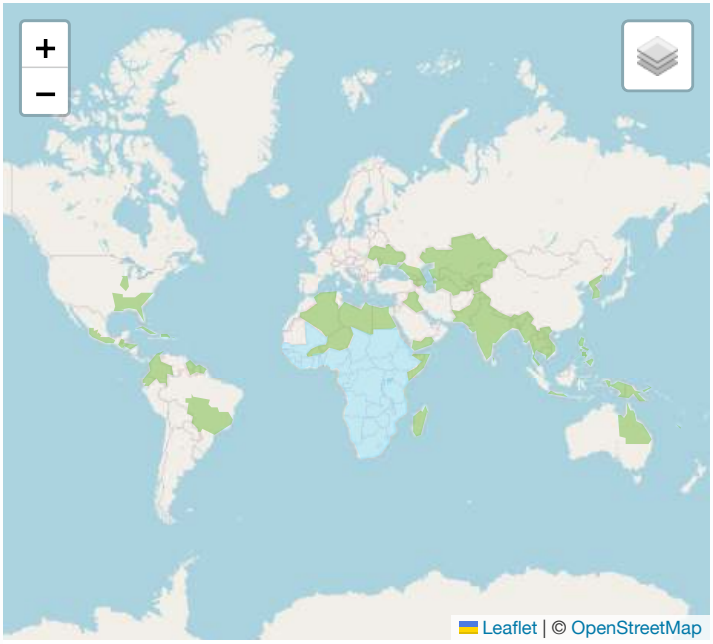
Feijoada with rice, fried kale, cassava…

Feijoada à brasileira.

P & C Soul Food Deli, Shreveport,…

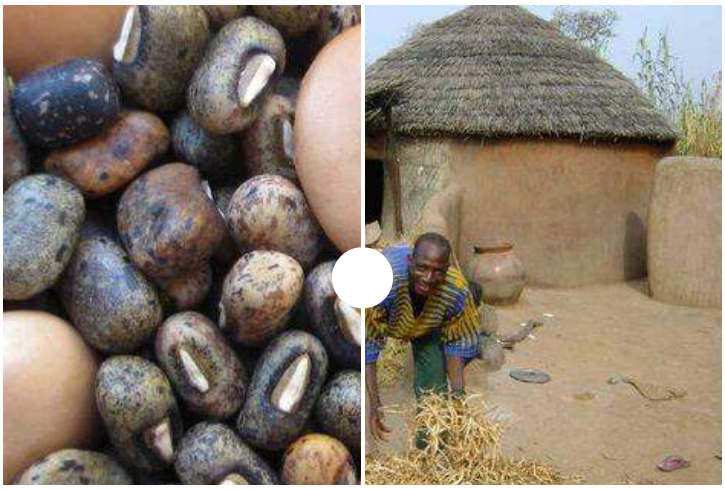
Climate Change, Breeding, and Resilience

Today, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that around 7 million tons of black-eyed peas are produced annually worldwide.[30] The centers of production are still in Africa, the plant's ancestral home, with Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Tanzania being among the world's top producers, accounting for 80 percent of the world's black-eyed pea crop.[31] It is estimated that it is grown on more than 12 million hectares in many different countries, where it is often intercropped with grains such as sorghum and millet or rice.[32] Black-eyed peas are the third most important pulse worldwide—a crucial component of sustainable agriculture and source of food for hundreds of millions of people.



Map of black-eyed pea distribution showing native range…

Agriculture is having to adapt to our changing climate, both in terms of practices and what crops can be grown where. Even though black-eyed peas are considered very hardy, the crop may struggle as temperatures rise and rains become more erratic. Crop breeding is one way to make commercial black-eyed peas more resilient, while perhaps also making them more digestible and nutritious. Hardy wild relatives of the black-eyed pea may hold genes or genetic traits that will allow the crop to survive hotter, drier conditions, and perhaps be more pest-resistant.[33] If these traits can be bred into commercial varieties then the black-eyed pea may hold one of the answers to ensuring food security throughout the world.



The Crop Wild Relatives Project is researching 11 primary relatives of the black-eyed pea in partnership with 33 countries and global seed banks, including the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture and Royal Botanic Garden, Kew's Millennium Seed Bank.[34] Southern and western Africa are hotspots for wild black-eyed pea genetic variation. The importance of such relatives demonstrates how vital it is to protect wild plants and wild habitats. In a telling quote from Ousame Boukar, a Nigerian cowpea breeder: "The cowpea has nourished people for many centuries, but now it needs a hand to ensure it can continue to be an unfailing friend even while the climate crisis is affecting production." Programs like the Crop Wild Relatives Project bring us full circle, back to the wild plants of Africa and the adoption of the ancient practices of growing, seed collecting, and crop breeding.

Beyond the Gardens: The Crop Wild Relatives Project

A Food of the Future

Black-eyed pea's many names reflect its worldwide appeal. It is known as crowder pea, caupi, southern pea, alubia carilla, neibe, and frijole, as well as chowlee in India, gubgub in the West Indies, and akkerboon in South Africa.[35] And black-eyed peas and other legumes are globally growing in status as key cooking ingredients and foods of the future. Highly nutritious and relatively easy to grow, black-eyed peas will no doubt play an important part in future food security: providing food in changing climates and helping small-scale farmers combat poverty and hunger.[36] As the climate becomes warmer and more unpredictable, and as human populations grow and resources become more limited, crops such as black-eyed peas, with its many virtues, will contribute to the diets of more people.[37]

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