

The Popular Peanut

By Kay Bushnell

“My but they’re delicious, eating goober peas,” are the words of an old American folk tune. Goober peas is another name for peanuts. In the American south peanuts are often called groundnuts or goobers, from the Bantu word “nguba.”

A peanut looks like a nut and tastes like a nut, but it’s a legume, not a nut. However, the peanut’s nutritional profile is very similar to that of nuts. It contains significant amounts of protein, fat, fiber, magnesium potassium, niacin, vitamin E, folacin, and beneficial phytochemicals (plant chemicals).

Peanut plants are annuals that develop in a fascinating way. The small flowers that form near the base of peanut plants bloom for two to three months, opening at sunrise and closing by noon. Then the plant takes a trip “down under.” If the farmer has planted it in loose soil with adequate amounts of calcium, the flower stalks turn downward, pushing about 3 inches into the soil. Soon up to six peanut pods develop at the tip of the burrowing stalk. Peanut plants thrive in warm parts of the world, places such as India, China, Nigeria, and the states of Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, Texas, Alabama, Oklahoma, and Florida. The U.S. is third in worldwide peanut production after India and China.

Half of the American crop is ground into peanut butter. In contrast, India and China turn most of their peanuts into peanut oil, which is used in cooking, lubricants, soap, cosmetics and toiletries, paint, and fire extinguishing foam. After the oil is extracted from the peanuts the leftover protein and fiber are used to make textiles, livestock feed, fertilizer, plastics, and building materials.

The peanut traveled circuitously to North America. It originated in South America. Then traders and sailors took it to West Africa and China. It returned to the western hemisphere on slave ships in the eighteenth century. Some sources say that native North Americans were already growing peanuts before the eighteenth century.

In the nineteenth century southern agriculture became excessively dependent on cotton. The soil became depleted, and the boll weevil attacked the cotton plants. The legendary George Washington Carver, an African American teacher at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, is credited with rejuvenating southern agriculture at that difficult time. In his laboratory Professor Carver developed at least 300 commercial uses for the peanut and urged southern farmers to plant peanuts and soybeans to restore the soil. Thanks to the genius of Professor Carver, within a period of fifty years peanuts went from being of negligible importance in the southern economy to becoming its second most important cash crop.

As peanuts made their way into America’s kitchens, first as a cheap source of protein and later in gourmet meals, chefs began to incorporate more peanut dishes in their menus. They borrowed peanut recipes from the cuisines of southeast Asia and Africa in the form

of peanut sauces and stews. Peanut sauces enrich vegetable, pasta, and rice dishes. Peanuts are a popular flavor in cakes, cookies, pies, and energy bars, often in combination with chocolate.

Here are a few facts about Americans' beloved peanut butter. In 1890 Joseph Lambert invented a machine for making peanut butter in the home. At the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis peanut butter was promoted as a health food. Its popularity increased after a process was developed to keep peanut oil from separating from the peanut butter in the 1920s.

The peanuts in shells that you buy at ball games have been soaked in brine. You'll enjoy the authentic flavor of peanuts if you use them raw, unsalted, and unroasted. If you want peanut butter that contains just ground peanuts with or without salt, read labels carefully. Some commercial brands are mixed with sugar, hydrogenated fat, and other additives. Finally, when you tire of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, substitute sliced bananas, apples, sweet pickles, or shredded carrots and raisins for the jelly. Store unshelled peanuts a cool, dry place. Keep shelled peanuts in a tight container in the freezer.