

Origins of Domestic Plants



Domestic Wheat. Image by Bluemoose.

In the same way that people tamed the **animals** that they had hunted for thousands of years, so they domesticated some of the **plants** that they had gathered for thousands of years.

Wheat

One of the earliest **plants** to be domesticated was **wheat**. People had gathered wild **wheat** for thousands of years in the Middle East, but wild **wheat** is very brittle and when ripe the seeds scatter everywhere very easily. This meant that people spent a lot of time having to be very careful when collecting it. About 12,000 years ago in Turkey and the Middle East people started planting the **wheat** which didn't drop its seeds so easily and collecting those ones in preference. In this way, after some time they created domestic **wheat**.

Peas

Wild **peas** only occur near the Mediterranean and in the Middle East. About 9,000 years ago people started choosing **peas** which had a softer shell and also ones which ripened during the wet season (winter). They also chose larger **peas** over time. This led to the domestic **pea** that we know today. About 5,000 years ago people traded **peas** up the Nile River in Egypt to Ethiopia and they have grown there ever since. The **peas** in Ethiopia are slightly different from modern **peas**, because they have been relatively cut off in the highlands for about 5,000 years.



Peas in their pods. Image by Bill Ebbesen.



Lentils

Lentils may have been domesticated as early as 13,000 years ago and definitely by 10,000 years ago. These early **lentils** were tiny. It took more than 1,000 years before **lentils** were as big as they are today. **Lentils** were a very popular food in the Ancient Middle East. The labourers who built the pyramids in Egypt ate large numbers of **lentils**, probably for breakfast, lunch and in the evening!



Three types of modern lentils.

Other **plants** domesticated in the Middle East included barley, chickpeas and broad beans. All of these early domestic **plants** have been found in the early levels at Jericho, the oldest city in the world.

Rice

Rice was domesticated in China, in Asia, between 13,000 and 8,000 years ago. Rice has been one of the most important foods in Asia ever since. The wild ancestor of modern rice has tiny grains, a hard husk and the grains ripen at different times. People started selecting and growing rice in the wet river valleys in China, because rice grows in flooded fields called “paddies”.



Rice paddies. Image by Niek Sprakel.

Maize



Teosinte, a mixed plant and modern maize. Image by John Doebley.

Maize (also known as **corn**) was a complicated **plant** to domesticate. It is very different from its probable wild ancestor (called “*teosinte*”), which is tiny and looks more like a grass, than the large cobs of **corn** we know today. It took several thousand years and much careful selection of **plants**, as well as mixing pollen from one **plant** with another to produce modern **corn**. Some



researchers have suggested that **maize** was domesticated by about 9,000 years ago, but most agree that it had happened by 6,000 years ago. **Maize** was domesticated in the highlands of Mexico, in Central America.

These and many other domestic **plants** have been traded by people to many parts of the world and so we all eat a diet today that is made up of **plants** and **animals** which come from a wide range of countries all over the world.

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