

Spread Some Peanut Love!

By Susan Camp

My 4th grade teacher had a quirky sense of humor, and sometimes we weren't sure when she was joking. During our Earth Science unit, she told us that George Washington Carver had invented peanuts. I was fairly sure she was kidding, but I suspect a few of my classmates initially thought she was telling the truth. Peanuts originated in South America, and they are not true nuts.

I did believe for years that Carver had invented peanut butter, and was disappointed to find out that the honor went instead to Canadian pharmacist Marcellus Gilmore Edson, who was awarded the U.S. patent for peanut butter in 1884.

George Washington Carver was born into slavery in 1864. After years of struggle to receive an education, he graduated from college in 1896 with a Master of Science in Botany. His interests were plant physiology and mycology (the study of fungi).

Booker T. Washington invited Carver to head the Agriculture Department at Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University), where he taught for 47 years. Carver's primary contribution to agriculture was his early exploration of organic farming, specifically the development of crops that could replace cotton as the primary commercial crop for small farmers in the southern United States. Cotton plants quickly deplete the soil of nutrients, and nodules on the roots of legumes like peanuts, soybeans, and cowpeas, (black-eyed peas) contain nitrogen-fixing bacteria that help enrich the soil. Today, peanut and soybean farming are billion-dollar enterprises in the U.S. and other countries.

Several types of peanuts are grown in the United States. Virginia peanuts have large kernels and excellent flavor. They are frequently labeled as "gourmet" peanuts. Runner peanuts are used to produce peanut butter. Spanish peanuts are small with papery reddish-brown skins. Valencia peanuts also have skins and are either roasted or boiled.

Peanuts are high in protein, polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats, vitamins, minerals, and fiber.

Have you ever found a peanut plant growing among the perennials in your garden? Squirrels love to plant nuts and then forget where they put them. I find two or three peanut plants every summer. I pull them up and discard them, but after doing some research for this column, I may adopt a different technique for disposing of found peanuts plants.

Instead of despairing over squirrel behavior, I may move the peanut plants to pots next summer. The plants are attractive with bright green leaves and pea-like, orange-veined yellow flowers. Instructions for growing your own peanut plants are found on the National Peanut Board website. Peanut plants are allelopathic, which means they release toxic chemicals that will affect the growth of nearby plants but you can plant raw, unprocessed peanuts in loose, well-drained sandy or loamy soil in a large, deep pot. Peanuts require 8 hours of direct sunlight each day.

Water once a week, but don't soak your plant. The flowers will bloom in 30 to 40 days. After the petals drop, the remaining ovaries, or pegs, begin to grow toward the soil. Each peg contains the embryo of a peanut. After 130 to 160 days, you can harvest your peanuts. Each plant can produce 30 to 40 nuts. The NCState Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox entry "Arachis hypogaea" recommends leaving the roots in the ground after harvesting the nuts so they can continue to release nitrogen.

Spread the peanut pods in a single layer in a cool, dry room for two to three weeks. After that, you can eat them raw or roast or boil them. Find recipes on the National Peanut Board website.

Peanut seeds contain chemicals that can cause serious or even fatal allergic reactions, including anaphylaxis, in susceptible individuals. Always let guests know if you plan to serve peanuts or foods containing peanut products.

I can't help but reflect this week on a peanut farmer from Georgia with a toothy, boyish grin and an endearing manner. Jimmy Carter lived a phenomenal life for 100 years. We would do well to emulate him every day in some small way.