

ARABICA COFFEE

Coffea arabica

- It probably originates from the mountain forests of Ethiopia in the province of Kaffa. The leaves of the plant were first added to animal feed by locals who noticed that their animals were more lively and “cheerful” after eating the coffee plant. People started drinking coffee in the 6th century.
- In the 13th and 14th centuries, the coffee plant reached Yemen from its native Ethiopia, the first coffee plantations were established, and drinking of a beverage made from the plant’s seeds gradually became popular. In the 16th century, the first coffee shop opened in Mecca and coffee quickly spread throughout the Islamic world.
- Until the 17th century, coffee plants were not grown anywhere else than on the Arabian peninsula. The Arabs guarded coffee because it was a very good source of income for local traders – any export of green seeds was forbidden and severely punished. In 1616, however, Dutch spies managed to smuggle coffee seeds into one of their colonies – Java.
- Gradually, other European powers began to rely on growing coffee in their colonies. In the 18th century, coffee began to be grown in the Americas – the British brought it to Jamaica, and after clearing the native forests, Brazil proved ideal for growing coffee.
- Given that the aim of colonial administration was to export as much wealth as possible, colonial states were forced to reorient their economies towards growing one or a few crops for export. Slavery and other forms of forced labour provided sufficient workforce. (For example, on Caribbean and Brazilian plantations, in Java, etc., generations of small coffee growers from Central America and East Africa were dependent on traffickers and forced labour, although they often farmed their own land.)

SUGAR CANE

Saccharum officinarum

- Sugar cane is native to Papua New Guinea, but was first used by humans in India, where around 2,500 years ago people began cutting its stalks to extract the sweet juice from which they later learned to make sugar.
- From India, sugar cane cultivation spread to the West African coast and then to Spain.
- Sugar cane seedlings were brought to the Americas by Christopher Columbus, and European colonialists established giant sugar cane plantations there to produce sugar for Europeans. (Sugar cane, which is best for sugar production, can only be grown in the wider tropical and subtropical zone because of the climate.) And it was on these plantations that many of the estimated 12 million slaves brought to the Americas from Africa during the era of slavery ended up. The colonies became a source of cheap labour (slaves) and raw materials (sugar cane), while Europe processed and sold sugar.
- The import of cane sugar from overseas continued until the end of the Napoleonic Wars, when Napoleon Bonaparte imposed a ban on the import of English goods. As a result, sugar beet breeding began and cane sugar was gradually replaced by beet sugar, although beet sugar is more difficult and expensive to produce. Many factors can influence the price of sugar. These include low sugar cane production due to climate change or the influence of agricultural policies (for example, the imposition of a high tariff on sugar from sugar cane).

COCOA TREE

Theobroma cacao

- It is native to the tropical regions of the Americas.
- Cocoa and chocolate were not introduced to Europe until the 16th century, when the Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés brought them from the Americas to Spain.
- Cocoa eventually caught on in Europe, and by the end of the 17th century its consumption was so widespread that Portuguese, French, English, and Dutch settlers established cocoa plantations in their colonies in South America.
- The colonists often forced members of Native American tribes to do hard labour, often in difficult conditions. This, combined with epidemics, led to a huge population decline – from around 25 million to 3 million in just fifty years. In agriculture, a shortage of labour soon became apparent. This was resolved by importing black slaves from Africa who were forced to work on plantations, not just of cocoa trees.
- It was not until the 19th century that colonists established cocoa plantations in Africa. The coast of the Gulf of Guinea proved to be the most suitable for growing cocoa, and West Africa quickly became the world's leading producer and exporter of cocoa beans. Today, West African cocoa accounts for two-thirds of world production. The largest growers and exporters are Ivory Coast, Ghana and Nigeria.
- One of the problems caused by cocoa cultivation is deforestation. Growers clear the original tropical forest and plant cocoa trees in its place. However, around 20 years after planting, yields gradually start to decline. This is often due to soil depletion and the decreasing resistance of old trees to pests and diseases. Restoring plantations is often too expensive for small growers, so cocoa farming gradually spreads to other areas, causing further clearing of native forests.

BANANA PLANT

Musa (genus)

- Bananas are thought to have originated in South-East Asia, where they spread with population movements to islands in the Pacific Ocean, Madagascar, Africa, India and the Arab world.
- Bananas began to spread to Europe with the arrival of Islam with the Arabs in the 9th and 10th centuries. After the defeat of the Arabs, Portuguese and Spanish colonists continued to cultivate bananas, mainly in their colonies, spreading them from Asia, Africa and the Arab world to all of South and Central America.
- It was not until the end of the 19th century that bananas began to be traded on a large scale in the United States. American entrepreneurs discovered that very cheap bananas in the Caribbean could be sold in major American cities for many times the price. By the early 20th century, US banana-importing companies already owned huge banana and sugar cane plantations in Central America and the Caribbean and had a huge influence on the politics and economies of these countries.
- Bananas are the most consumed fresh fruit in the world, but unfair wages and poor working conditions negatively affect the daily lives of plantation workers and small farmers. However, production conditions are problematic, and global competition among exporters is harming the weakest link in the supply chain, the grower. One of the concepts that addresses these issues is Fairtrade.