

March is National Peanut Month

National Peanut Month is a good time to celebrate one of America's favorite foods! Roasted in the shell for a ballpark snack, ground into peanut butter or tossed in a salad or stir-fry, peanuts find their way into everything from breakfast to dessert.

National Peanut Month had its beginnings as National Peanut Week in 1941 and was expanded to a month-long celebration in 1974. Coincidentally, March is National Nutrition Month - a great time to recognize the nutritional value of peanuts. One serving of peanuts is a good source of protein, vitamin E, niacin, folate, phosphorus and magnesium – providing over 30 essential nutrients and phytonutrients. Peanuts are naturally cholesterol-free and low in saturated fat.

The peanut or groundnut (*Arachis hypogaea*), is a species in the legume “bean” family (Fabaceae) native to Mexico, and South and Central Americas. It is an annual herbaceous plant known by many local names, including earthnuts, ground nuts, goober peas, monkey nuts, pygmy nuts and pig nuts. The term “Monkey nut” often refers to the entire pod.

Evidence shows that peanuts were domesticated in prehistoric times in Peru. Archeologists dated the oldest specimens to about 7,600 years ago. The legume gained Western popularity when it came to the United States from Africa and became popular in Africa after being brought there from Brazil by the Portuguese around 1800.

Although peanuts come in many varieties, there are four basic market types: Runner, Virginia, Spanish and Valencia. Each of the peanut types is distinctive in size, flavor, and nutritional composition.

Runners have become the dominant type due to the introduction in the early 1970's of a new runner variety, the Florunner, which was responsible for an increase in peanut yields. Runners have an attractive, uniform kernel size. Fifty-four percent of runners grown are used for peanut butter. Runners are grown mainly in Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Texas and Oklahoma.

Virginias have the largest kernels and account for most of the peanuts roasted and processed in-the-shell. When shelled, many of the larger kernels are sold as gourmet snack peanuts. Virginias are grown mainly in southeastern Virginia, northeastern North Carolina and South Carolina.

Spanish-type peanuts have smaller kernels covered with a reddish-brown skin. They are used predominantly in peanut candies, with most used for snack nuts and peanut butter. They have a higher oil content than the other types of peanuts which is advantageous when crushing for oil. They are primarily grown in Oklahoma and Texas.

Valencia's usually have three or more small kernels to a pod and are covered in a bright-red skin. They are very sweet and are usually roasted and sold in-the-shell. Valencias are used fresh as boiled peanuts and they are primarily produced in New Mexico.

Various peanut types are distinguished by branching habit and branch length. Within each of the four basic types there are several “varieties” for seed and production purposes allowing producers to select the peanut that best suits their region and market. Each year new cultivars of peanuts are bred and introduced.

Peanuts grow best in light, sandy soil. They require five months of warm weather, and an annual rainfall of 20-39 inches or the equivalent in irrigation water. Unlike other nuts, peanuts do not grow on trees but grow on plants which flower above the soil and fruit below it. Peanuts are usually planted in April or May and once planted, the seeds grow into a green, oval-shaped-leaf plant which reaches about 18 inches in height when fully mature. Small yellow flowers appear in the lower part of the plant as it begins to grow. These flowers pollinate themselves and then lose their petals as the fertilized ovary begins to enlarge. The enlarged ovary, called the peg, grows down and away from the plant forming a small stem which extends to the soil. The peanut embryo is the tip of the peg, which penetrates the soil and begins to develop once underground, growing into a peanut. Pods ripen 120 to 150 days after the seeds are planted. If the crop is harvested too early, the pods will be unripe and if harvested too late, pods will snap off at the stalk and remain in the soil.

Peanuts are used in many cultures around the world in a wide variety of ways. In the US, peanuts are used in candies, cakes, cookies, and other sweets and are also enjoyed roasted and salted. Peanut butter is one of the most popular peanut-based foods in the US. Boiled peanuts are a popular snack in the southern US, as well as in India and China. Peanuts are also used in the Mali meat stew maafe, and in many sauces for South American meat dishes.

Pumpy Nut and Medika Mamba are a high protein, high energy and high nutrient peanut-based paste that were developed to be used as a therapeutic food to aid in famine relief. Organizations like the World Health Organization, UNICEF, Project Peanut Butter and Doctors Without Borders have used these products to help save malnourished children in developing countries.

Peanut plant tops are used for hay. Low grade or culled peanuts not suitable for edible market are used in the production of peanut oil. The protein cake residue from oil processing is used as an animal feed and as a soil fertilizer. Low grade peanuts are also widely sold as a garden bird feed. Peanuts have a variety of industrial end uses. Paint, varnish, lubricating oil, leather dressings, furniture polish, insecticides, and nitroglycerin are made from peanut oil. Soap is made from saponified oil, and many cosmetics contain peanut oil and its derivatives. The protein portion of the oil is used in the manufacture of some textile fibers. Peanut shells are used in the manufacture of plastic, wallboard, abrasives, fuel, cellulose (used in rayon and paper) and mucilage (glue). Rudolf Diesel ran some of the first engines that bear his name on peanut oil and it is still a potentially useful fuel.

George Washington Carver is credited with inventing 300 different uses for peanuts (but not peanut butter). Carver was one of many USDA researchers who encouraged cotton farmers in the South to grow peanuts instead of, or in addition to cotton, because cotton had depleted so much nitrogen from the soil, and one of the peanut's properties as a legume is to put nitrogen back into the soil (known as nitrogen fixation).

China and India are the world's largest Producers of peanuts but they only export about 4% because most of their production is consumed domestically as peanut oil. Major producer/exporters of peanuts are the United States, Argentina, Sudan, Senegal, and Brazil accounting for 71% of total world exports.

Peanut butter was invented by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg (of cereal fame), who applied for the first patent in 1895. Peanut butter was first introduced at the Universal Exposition (World's Fair of 1904) in St. Louis, Missouri.

Peanut Facts:

- Peanuts are not actually nuts at all! They are legumes, like beans, peas and lentils.
- Americans eat 3 pounds of peanut butter per person every year. That's about 700 million pounds, or enough to coat the floor of the Grand Canyon or to make more than 10 billion peanut butter and jelly sandwiches!
- Two peanut farmers have been elected President of the United States. Can you name them?
- One acre of peanuts will make 30,000 peanut butter sandwiches.
- It takes about 540 peanuts to make a 12-ounce jar of peanut butter.
- Women and children prefer creamy, while most men opt for chunky peanut butter.
- Four of the top 10 candy bars manufactured in the US contain peanuts or peanut butter.
- It takes two grindings to make peanut butter. The intense heat produced from one, long grinding would ruin the flavor of the peanut butter.
- The average child will eat 1,500 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches before he/she graduates high school.
- Peanuts contribute over four billion dollars to the U.S. economy each year.

Peanut Farming Facts:

- There are four types of peanuts grown in the USA — Runner, Virginia, Spanish and Valencia.
- Peanuts are planted after the last frost in April/early May and heaviest harvesting months are September & October.
- The peanut growth cycle from planting to harvest is 120 to 160 days or about five months.
- The peanut plant originated in South America.
- Peanut plants produce a small yellow flower.
- Peanuts flower above ground and then migrate underground to reach maturity.
- A mature peanut plant produces about 40 pods that then grow into peanuts.
- Most USA peanut farms are family-owned and –operated and average 100 acres in size.

The two presidents who were peanut farmers were Thomas Jefferson and Jimmy Carter.

Teachers can visit the following websites for elementary lessons and activities on peanuts <http://www.aboutpeanuts.com>
<http://www.nationalpeanutboard.org/classroom-lessonplans.php>