EGGPLANT is native to India and China, and was introduced to Europe by Arabic traders. The plant grows a large oval, deep purple fruit, which is used as a vegetable in cooking. It is a member of the same family as potatoes, tomatoes, and peppers.

BEETS (Beta vulgaris) are a member of the order of flowering plants called Caryophyllales, which also includes bougainvillea, cacti, amaranth, carnations, spinach, and venus fly traps. Modern beets are derived from wild sea beets that originated around the coasts of Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Beets are best grown in moderate summer temperatures. Since the 16th century, beet juice has been used as a natural red dye. It was even used as a hair dye.

WHEAT originally grew wild in the Middle East and southwestern Asia in ancient times, and records show people were gathering wheat for food as far back as 11,000 B.C. It played an important role of religious significance and was part of the sacred rituals of many cultures. Greek, Roman, Sumerian and Finnish mythology had gods and goddesses of wheat. This exceptionally nutritious grain is still considered to be sacred in some areas of China.

Wheat was not native to the Western Hemisphere and was only introduced here in the late 15th century when Columbus came to the New World. While wheat was grown in the United States during the early colonial years, it was not until the late 19th century that wheat cultivation flourished, owing to the importation of an especially hardy strain of wheat known as Turkey red wheat, which was brought over by Russian immigrants who settled in Kansas.

RICE plants are native to tropical and subtropical southern Asia and southeastern Africa. Rice provides more than one fifth of the calories consumed worldwide by humans. Rice is a staple for a vast part of the world’s human population, especially in East, South and Southeast Asia, making it the most consumed cereal grain. Rice cultivation is well-suited to countries and regions with low labor costs and high rainfall, as it is very-intensive to cultivate and requires plenty of water for irrigation, much like the rice crops found in Eastern Europe. Rice can be grown practically anywhere, even on steep hillsides. Although its species are native to South Asia and certain parts of Africa, centuries of trade and exportation have made it commonplace in many cultures. The Spanish brought rice to South America at the beginning of the 16th century.

OKRA originated somewhere around Ethiopia, and was cultivated by the ancient Egyptians by the 12th century B.C. Its cultivation spread throughout North Africa and the Middle East. The seed pods were eaten cooked, and the seeds were toasted and ground, used as a coffee substitute (and still is). Okra came to the Caribbean and the U.S. in the 1700s, probably brought by slaves from West Africa, and was introduced to Western Europe soon after. In Louisiana, the Creoles learned from slaves the use of okra (gumbo) to thicken soups and it is now an essential in Creole Gumbo.