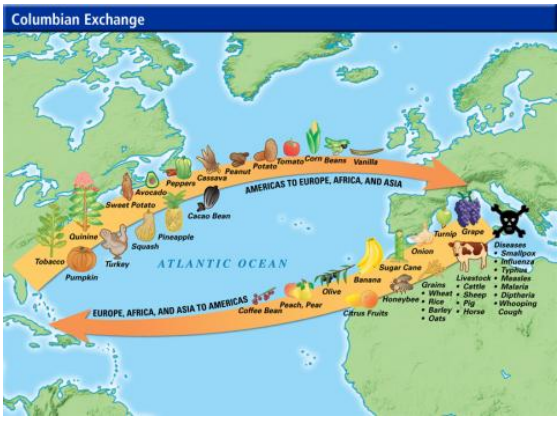
The Columbian Exchange



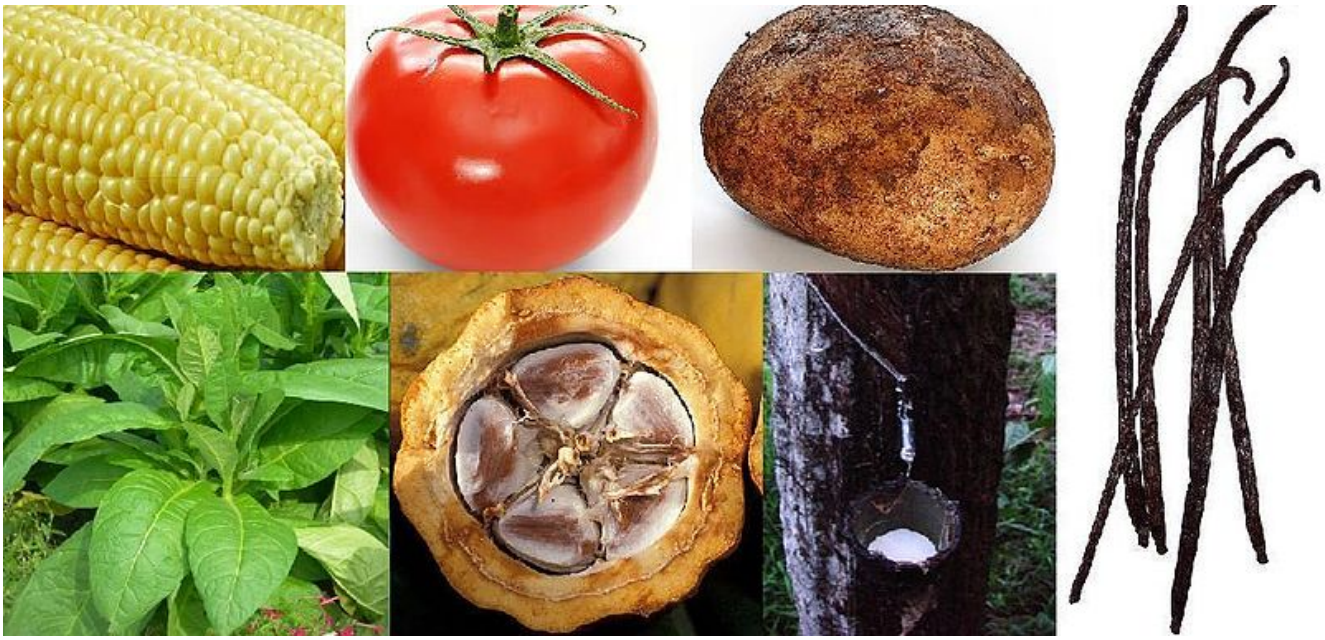
In 1492, when Columbus “sailed the ocean blue,” he thought he was sailing to “the East.” Instead of reaching Asia, however, he arrived at an island in the Bahamas.

While historians still debate whether Columbus was the first to discover America, there is little doubt he was the first to initiate what is known today as “The Columbian Exchange.”

What is that?

The Columbian Exchange refers to the exchange of plants, animals and—significantly—diseases, between the “Old World” and the “New World,” which began with Columbus.

How, for example, did a crop originating in South America (the potato) end-up becoming so important to Ireland? Because sailors returning home from the “New World” brought potato “tubers” back to the “Old World.” They likely planted them in gardens and the rest, as the saying goes, is history.



The same is true for many non-native items which made their way from the “Old World” to the “New.” How did yams, black-eyed peas, okra, sorghum and sesame become “New-World” crops? They arrived—among other ways—with kidnapped Africans who, after crossing the Atlantic during the “Middle Passage,” became slaves.

Pathogens, causing malaria and yellow fever, traveled from Africa to the Americas in the same way. So did smallpox, that deadly and disfiguring disease which accompanied Europeans (like the Pilgrims) to America (where it proved catastrophic to Native Americans).

How catastrophic were diseases from the "Old World" to Native Americans? Historians estimate that these illnesses may have killed up to 90% of the Native-American population:

> *When the Europeans arrived, carrying germs which thrived in dense, semi-urban populations, the indigenous people of the Americas were effectively doomed. They had never experienced smallpox, measles or flu before, and the viruses tore through the continent, killing an estimated 90% of Native Americans.* (See "The Story Of... Smallpox – and other Deadly Eurasian Germs," at PBS.)

Life on Earth changed, dramatically, after 1492. As Alfred Cosby—the historian who coined the phrase "Columbia Exchange"—notes:

> *... life on our planet changes drastically and forever as the eastern and western hemispheres began to exchange life forms, both marcro and micro.* (*The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, 30th Anniversary Edition, at page 19.)

How significant is the Columbian Exchange today? Tremendously significant, because it touches us nearly every day, whether we live in the "Old World" or the "New."

Beginning with Columbus' 1492 voyage, the two worlds started to become more alike. As Alfred Cosby notes:

> *...the two worlds, which were so very different, began on that day* [October 12, 1492—the day Columbus reached the Bahamas] *to become alike. That trend toward biological homogeneity is one of the most important aspects of the history of life on this planet since the retreat of the continental glaciers.* (Cosby, at 27.)

The map image, at the top of this page, depicts the impact of the Columbian Exchange on both the eastern and the western hemispheres. Click on it for a full-page view.

Credits:

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/The-Columbian-Exchange

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Media Stream

Columbian Exchange - New to Old World

When Columbus reached the Bahamas, in October of 1492, he started what is now known as “The Columbian Exchange.”

People who traveled to the “Old World” (in the Eastern Hemisphere) from the “New World” (in the Western Hemisphere)—and vice versa—transported plants, animals and diseases.

This exchange of cultural and biological organisms caused the world to become more similar. Today it is a more homogeneous place than it was in 1492 because of these Columbian-Exchange actions.

This image depicts domesticated plants which travelers brought from the “New World” to the “Old.” Starting at the top left, and moving clockwise, we see:

- Maize (*Zea mays*)
- Tomato (*Solanum lycopersicum*)
- Potato (*Solanum tuberosum*)
- Vanilla (*Vanilla*)
- Pará rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*)
- Cacao (*Theobroma cacao*)
- Tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica*)

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Columbian Exchange - Old to New World

When Columbus reached the Bahamas, in October of 1492, he started a series of events that are now known as “The Columbian Exchange.”

What is the Columbian Exchange?

People who traveled to the “New World” (in the Western Hemisphere) from the “Old World” (in the Eastern Hemisphere)—and vice versa—transported plants, animals and diseases.

This exchange of cultural and biological organisms caused the world to become more similar. Today Planet Earth is a more homogeneous place than it was in 1492 because of these actions.

This image depicts domesticated plants which travelers brought from the “Old World” to the “New.” Starting at the top left, and moving clockwise, we see:

- Citrus (*Rutaceae*)
- Apple (*Malus domestica*)
- Banana (*Musa*)
- Mango (*Mangifera*)
- Onion (*Allium*)
- Coffee (*Coffea*)
- Wheat (*Triticum spp.*)
- Rice (*Oryza sativa*)

Click on the image for a better view.

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