

Bitter Roots, Global Routes: Tracing the Diasporic Spread of Bitter Eggplant



This migration map tracks the movement of *S. aethiopicum* across the world and records the travel of Evergreen students and professors who have had the experience of visiting bitter eggplant growing area.

It is a vegetable that may have multiple independent centers of origin. Taken along with the victimized peoples of the transatlantic slave trade, bitter eggplant (called *gilo* or *jilo* or *Guinea squash* in the new world) became a staple of the food cultures to which it was introduced. Italian soldiers engaged in colonial warfare in Ethiopia returned home with bitter eggplant in tow, which is now being supported by the Slow Food Ark of Taste as the Italian specialty variety, 'Rotonda'.

Complex roots and routes often are connected to inequitable systems of rule and economy. Questions arise surrounding the ownership and monetization of traditional ecological knowledge, and as well as the lack of respect for Indigenous cultures.

The history of food is the history of human diaspora. *Solanum aethiopicum*, or bitter eggplant, is an excellent example of the enormous complexities at play when food and people shift because of foraging, migration, enslavement, colonialism, or war.

References: <http://wordpress.evergreen.edu/2024/gilovanetytrial>

Solanum aethiopicum, also called bitter eggplant, Ethiopian eggplant, and garden egg, among other names, has a center of origin in the tropics of East Africa, spreading west and south across ecologically diverse habitats ranging from equatorial savanna woodlands to near deserts.

Wild relations of *S. aethiopicum*, such as *S. incanum*, are extremely morphologically variable, and *S. aethiopicum* is said to be "closer" to its wild ancestors than other species of eggplant.

Bitter eggplant arrived in Britain in the 1500's; it is from that plant that the word 'eggplant' derives. The fruit of *S. aethiopicum* is often small, white, and ellipsoid. The Asian eggplant, *S. melongena*, acquired the name despite its very different appearance.

Bitter eggplant spread to the global west through the transatlantic slave trade. It was common for slave traders to feed enslaved peoples low quality staple foods. Many Africans chose to protest. To coerce eating, slave traders often used foods with which enslaved peoples were familiar.

These crops were brought in steerage to feed enslaved people on the journey and to be planted on arrival in the West Indies or Americas. It is hypothesized that from seeds and rootstock occasionally remaining from slave-ship voyages, enslaved Africans accessed familiar dietary staples.

There are stories of enslaved peoples braiding seeds into hair to ensure food wherever they eventually ended up.

Rotonda red is a variety of bitter eggplant that arrived in Basilicata, Italy with soldiers returning from Ethiopia during the period of Italian colonialism in Africa (1869-1896).

The cultivation of the red eggplant in Rotonda was linked to the particular conditions of these soldiers and was considered a plant of poverty. Its cultivation and consumption represented a stigma.

Eggplants are traditionally prepared *nzertate* (tied up in bunches and left to dry under roofing) and are then eaten in oil or vinegar. Slow Food's Ark of Taste recognizes Rotonda red eggplant as a "local breed" and supports the preservation methods of the region.

Bitter eggplant has been studied and bred in the United States since the early 2000's, but immigrants may have been growing garden eggs for much longer.

The late Dr. Frank Mangan supported local immigrant communities by establishing production and marketing systems for herb and vegetable crops like bitter eggplant for the Brazilian community in Massachusetts.

Simeon Bakunda, an immigrant from the Congo who lives in Minnesota, has been breeding his variety of bitter eggplant, 'Simeon's White', for over eight years, and sells seed through North Circle Seeds.

Evergreen students and faculty have studied bitter eggplant, through a campus variety field trial, global travel and regional work with immigrant farmers in our community.

After conducting field trials on radicchio, Sarah Dyer became intrigued with bitterness and learned of Brazilian *jilo* from farm faculty Ben Hunsdorfer. Sarah designed a capstone project on bitter eggplant, that developed its own roots and routes, becoming diasporic research.

Laura Reusche travelled to Tanzania and was able to observe the wild relatives of *S. aethiopicum* in situ. Laura also presented data on our trial of *S. aethiopicum* to a climate conference in Punjab, India.

Dr. Martha Rosemeyer attended the Slow Food event, Terra Madre: Salone del Gusto 2024 in Italy, and was able to dive deeper into Rotonda red eggplant.

Student researchers visited International Rescue Committee run Horseneck Farm in Kent, Washington, where they learned about IRC's program to educate and assist refugee farmers. About 1% of the United States total sub-Saharan African refugee population lives in King County.

SURF student Reggie Arberry and Dr. Sarah Williams marketed bitter eggplant at the DuPont Farmers Market for the Southwest Washington Food Hub, with the goal of bringing fresh, local vegetables to soldiers and their families around Joint Base Lewis McCord.

Dr. Sarah Williams will lead students to Trinidad and Tobago in early 2025 for the study abroad program "Bittersweet: Cocoa and Permaculture in Trinidad". Students project participants will pursue a Caribbean perspective on bitter eggplant, as well as taking the opportunity to explore bitterness through both diasporic crops and "cash" crops like cacao.

There are two hypotheses surrounding the roots of *S. aethiopicum* in South Asia. The first is that African eggplant traveled across the Arabian Peninsula. The second is that *S. aethiopicum* has dual centers of origin, first developing in Africa and then independently evolving in Asia.

Our recipes also had complex routes and roots. In our study, the history of food became diasporic research. Jongmu Lepcha, an Indian immigrant from Sikkim and the wife of Ben Hunsdorfer, assisted students in preparing her version of a traditional Sikkimese curry. Sarah Dyer's exploration of South King County's sub-Saharan immigrant population led to the preparation of Ghanaian garden egg stew. While exploring preservation techniques, Harry Daniels invented the bitter eggplant chip!