Amaranth History: Over 500 years of resistance.

Amaranth plant was highly regarded in pre-Columbian peoples. Within the agricultural activities of prehistoric people’s struggle in importance with corn and beans. It was consumed both in plant form as cereal and as vegetable, the grain production was during the Maya and Aztec periods in Central America. The Ignorance of the conquerors caused it’s agony. Currently the science is trying to restore its place as a nutritional and economic resource.

SACRED AND ESOTERIC: during prehispanic times

Amaranth is one of the oldest crops of Mesoamerica: the Mayans, the Aztecs, the Incas, gatherers and hunter knew it. The first records of this plant dates back 10,000 years, according to some researchers, and others, like Juan Manuel Vargas López from the University of Sonora, notes that the archaeological samples or grain amaranth Amaranthus cruentus, found in Tehuacan, Puebla, is dated back to 4000 BC, and indicates that it probably originated in Central and South America. Giovannina Vele, Bachelor of Biology degree from the Central University of Venezuela, confirms that the remote testimony of Amaranth associated with human activity, is 4000 BC, some seeds were found in the state of Veracruz (Mexico) in the Coxtatlán cave in indigenous communities called Ocampos.

The Mayas were perhaps the first to use amaranth, " xtes " as high-yielding crop, especially appreciated by its nutritional value. The Aztecs knew it as " huauhtli " and linked it with their religious rites. And the Incas called it " Amaranth " ( Little Giant ) and respected primarily for its healing powers. The word " amaranth " comes from Greek and means "plant that does not decline." It should be noted that the flowers of amaranth after being cut last long and do not fade, on the other hand they take a more delicate and pretty appearance when alive, that’s why it was formerly used to decorate the tombs and symbolized immortality.

According to information gathered in the various codices and what emerges from the anthropological remains studied, it is now known that there were thousands of hectares devoted to the cultivation of amaranth, where these beautiful plants flourished, tall, colorful and impressive, our ancestors called it " huauhtli " . According to existing evidence " Aztecs produced about 15 to 20 tons a year," more than five thousand acres were devoted to growing amaranth and every year the 17 provinces subjugated by Emperor Moctezuma sent this tribute to great Tenochtitlan over 20,000 tons of grain amaranth. It can be deduced that this drop came to represent a real element of trade, with great value rates. Amaranth was, therefore, food of mass consumption and highly appreciated.

The Aztecs considered it sacred for its drought resistance and it was associated with the sun by its reddish color. Three sufficient reasons to link it to their religious rites: " In religious festivals, Aztec women ground the seed, mixed with honey, molasses or blood of human victims of some sacrifice, and the resulting molded pulp (zoale) was modeled as statues idols and gods. These statues were later consumed during religious ceremonies."

At the same time, indigenous groups attributed energizing, aphrodisiac and even esoteric properties, considering it a sacred seed, which was used in the rituals of their polytheistic religious ceremonies. On these special occasions, amaranth, ground or roasted was mixed with honey maguey and the resulting paste was used to model figurines of animals, warriors, elements of nature or everyday life and, of course, deities like God of war, Huitzilopochtli. After the ceremony of worship, the figurines were cut and distributed among participants who use to eat it.

PAGAN FOOD DURING THE CONQUEST AND COLONIAL

When Hernán Cortés invaded Mexico in 1519, and began the conquest of the Aztec empire, such ceremonies were regarded as a perversion of the Catholic Eucharist and were banned. In order to destroy religion and eliminate their rituals. Cortés ordered that the crops were burned or crushed and he also sent to cut off the hands of people who were caught in possession or cultivating this grain.

The Spaniards, almost were able to eradicate their culture, because as we know, the conquerors imposed their religious views at all costs, condemning and destroying every rite. Some researchers argue that it was a military strategy to keep the people weak and easily conquer because amaranth was a food for warriors.

The result was that amaranth cultivation, possession and use remain totally banned in colonial times. This situation prevailed for centuries and the result was the almost disappearance of amaranth. It only survived in small areas of cultivation in mountainous and inaccessible areas of Mexico and South America (Andean Region). The corn and beans, both domesticated in Mesoamerica, were accelerated up to become staples for the world development. Meanwhile, amaranth was practically forgotten.
In a little time the cultivation of amaranth, with high agricultural and religious value, sank into forgetfulness. Because the Inquisition of Cortés, " the species of grain amaranth are almost unknown and have remained dormant as a food crop. Its production fell sharply between 1577 and 1890, and there are few records of grain production after that date. However, it was during this period that came to Africa and Asia, and many of its ornamental forms were introduced into European gardens. Vargas López says that together with the replacement of native crops by Old World led amaranth to an unfortunate situation. Some farmers continued with the crops just for their own consumption in communities removed to the mountains.

THE RESURRECTION OF AMARANTO

The global spread of the nutritional benefits of amaranth has taken place until well into the twentieth century, once science, supported by cutting edge technology resources, has demonstrated its extraordinary nutritional value, particularly in regards to protein intake, which has consequently led to a boom in the cultivation of amaranth in different countries.

The rapid population growth and food shortages have driven men to seek viable alternatives and sufficient to solve the food problem. In this context, the World Congress convened in 1979 by the Academy of Sciences of the United States and the Organization of Food and Agriculture (FAO) of the United Nations (UN), amaranth was designated as one of the crops with the greatest potential for economic and nutritional large-scale exploitation.

The Academy of Sciences of the United States included the amaranth in the list of 23 plants that can be used to improve the nutrition and quality of life for people in the tropics.

Since then there have been extensive research on the crops, confirming its enormous potential as a source of high quality food.

However, these days it remains as an underutilized natural resource despite its promising nutritional and economic contribution. Advantageously, in 1975, the National Academy of Sciences in an effort to increase global food base, conducted a study and published a document entitled " Under-exploited Tropical Plants with Promising Economic Value. " Amaranth was included among 36 plants with potential. Thanks to this criterion, the darkness is ending with this plant, since then there were developed several specific initiatives that have reinserted both agronomic practice and the eating habits in order to return it in the usual diet.

The characteristics of amaranth have facilitated the work of reintegration, as it can take multiple forms such as grain, vegetable or as fodder. It is also a highly efficient crop that can thrive under adverse growing conditions: drought, high temperatures or saline soils. The seed has a great versatility and can be used in the preparation of various foods and also has a promising potential for industrial application, both in food and in the manufacture of cosmetics, dyes and even biodegradable plastics.

Source Research
http://www.amaranto.cl/noticia/historia-del-amaranto.html. Consultado 9 de febrero de 2014
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