



Okra (*Hibiscus esculentus*) is also called “gumbo” in this country, although the latter term is more often applied to soups or other dishes which contain okra. Both of these names are of African origin. “Gumbo” is believed to be a corruption of a Portuguese corruption, quingombo, of the word quillobo, native name for the plant in the Congo and Angola area of Africa.

# Okra

Africa, completely around the Mediterranean, and eastward. The absence of any ancient Indian names for it suggests that it reached India after the beginning of the Christian Era.

Okra apparently originated in what the geobotanists call the Abyssinian center of origin of cultivated plants, an area that includes present-day Ethiopia, the mountainous or plateau portion of Eritrea, and the eastern, higher part of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Considering the little contact between that region and the rest of the world within historic times, it is not surprising that little is known about the early history and distribution of okra.

# Okra

Wild Okra on the Upper Nile  
Although the plant has been well known in India for a long time, it is not found wild there. Modern travelers have found okra growing truly wild, however, along the White Nile and elsewhere in the upper Nile country as well as in Ethiopia.

The routes by which okra was taken from Ethiopia to North Africa, the eastern Mediterranean, Arabia, and India, and when, are by no means certain. Although it has been commonly cultivated in Egypt for many hundreds of years, no sign of it has ever been found in any of the ancient monuments or relics of old Egypt.

# Okra

One of the earliest accounts of okra is by a Spanish Moor who visited Egypt in 1216. He described the plant in detail, as cultivated by the Egyptians, and stated that the pods when young and tender were eaten with meal. (Southerners in our own country know how to cook it with corn meal—slice the pods, dip the pieces in meal, and fry them.)

Since the Spanish Moors and the Egyptians of the 12th and 13th centuries used an Arab word for okra, it probably was taken into Egypt by the Moslems from the East who conquered Egypt in the 7th century. It requires no stretch of the imagination to suppose that the plant earlier was taken from Ethiopia to Arabia across the narrow Red Sea or the narrower strait at its southern end.

# Okra

Because of the outstanding popularity of okra in the French cookery of Louisiana, and its slow gain in popularity elsewhere in this country, it is safe to assume that it was introduced to this country by the French colonists of Louisiana in the early 1700's. It had been introduced to the New World, however, before 1658, reaching Brazil supposedly from Africa. It was known in Surinam in 1686.

From Arabia okra was spread over North

# Okra

Strangely, records of okra during early American colonial times are lacking, although it must have been common among French colonists. It was being grown as far north as Philadelphia in 1748; Jefferson said it was known in Virginia before 1781. *(This information was taken from the original publication of “Our Vegetable Travelers” by Victor R. Boswell that appeared in the August, 1949 issue, Volume 96 (2) of National Geographic Magazine and is copyrighted by National Geographic Magazine.)*

