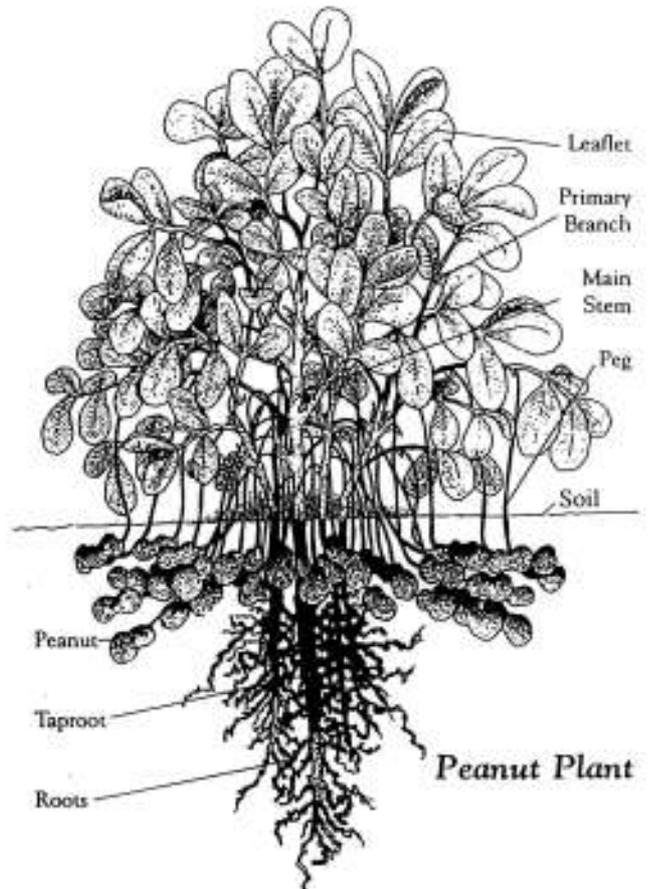


# Peanut

Botanical name: *Arachis hypoganea* Family: *Leguminosae*

They look like nuts, they hang out with nuts, but they are not nuts. They are ‘peas’, as in the legume family whom they belong to, and ‘nuts’ as in where they ought to be. Also known as ‘groundnuts’ or ‘earthnuts’, peanuts are not, botanically speaking, true nuts. The vine-like plants are actually legumes, like peas or beans and have the habit of thrusting their flower stems into the ground after flowering, where pollination and the fruit pods develop. Inside the pods are the edible nuts, and we harvest them like we do potatoes.

Pre-Inca time peanuts, first grown in Peru, were among the most important foods in the New World. They became known to the Old World as a result of the voyages of Columbus. From South America, the peanut spread around the world, from Africa to the Philippines, east Asia, across the Pacific to Mexico and on to North America. Now it is one of the world’s major food crops. India, China and the U.S. are principal exporting countries. In Australia, peanuts are grown intensively in Queensland.



There are several varieties and two main types of peanuts: the upright and the trailing. In the upright form, the nuts grow near the main roots and in the trailing form, the nuts scatter along creeping stems. The skin of the kernels may be white, cream, brown, red, or piebald (red and white). The number of kernels in a pod varies between two or three in some varieties and up to six or seven in others.

Peanuts are eaten in many ways. In western cuisine, they are usually roasted, salted, incorporated in confectionary or ground to a paste to make peanut butter. However, not everyone likes peanuts roasted and crunchy. In some South East Asian countries, peanuts are boiled in the shell in salty water and sold wrapped in twists of paper or banana leaves. The shells are discarded and the nuts enjoyed as a snack. Peanuts are important in the cuisines of Indonesia and Malaysia. We are all familiar with the famous *satay* – bite-sized pieces of meat on bamboo skewers grilled over hot coals and served dipped in spicy hot peanut sauce. Peanuts are also the main ingredient in the well known Indonesian salad dressing *gado gado*. In Africa, peanuts are an important staple food. Peanut ‘chop’ is a kind of stew, usually made with meat in which peanut paste features predominantly.

Peanuts are a rich source of protein. Peanut oil is mainly mono-unsaturated fat, much of which is oleic acid. Some say that peanuts contain an unbalanced source of fats because they have only trace amounts of required Omega-3 fats. Some brands of peanut butter, fortified with Omega-3, are now available in the market. Many people enjoy foods made with peanuts, but unfortunately some have mild to severe allergic reactions. The poor beleaguered peanut, long chastised for its fat content, in recent times has to face more adverse publicity on the allergy issue! No more peanut butter sandwiches for school lunches, no more packets of peanuts served with drinks on aeroplanes!

I myself love peanut butter on toast for breakfast and roasted peanuts sprinkled with salt and spice for a pre dinner appetizer. And *satay* is one of my favourite dishes.

Peanuts have several industrial uses. Some paints, varnishes, leather dressings and insecticides are made from peanut oil. Many cosmetics contain peanut oil and its derivatives. Peanut shells are used in the manufacture of plastic, wallboard and fuel. They are also used to make cellulose and glue. The plant tops are used to make hay. The protein-cake residue from oil processing is used in the manufacturer of some textile fibres, as animal feed, as well as a soil fertilizer.

*Chan Carroll*