

Reading: Sugar Plantations in the Americas

Sugar has been a favorite ingredient in foods for thousands of years. Sugar comes from the sugar cane plant that grows well in tropical areas. Sugar cane juice is squeezed from the plant. Then the juice is heated until all the liquid evaporates. This leaves behind sugar crystals.



Sugar cane has been around for a long time. The earliest records of sugar cane date all the way back to New Guinea in 8000 BC. The first people to use sugar cane, chewed it for the sugary juices. They would peel the skin off and chew the inside part of the plant. As long ago as the 5th century AD, an Indian chemist figured out how to separate the crystals from the juice. This is the first recording of solid sugar, or sucrose.

Sugar was an expensive spice for thousands of years and only wealthy people could afford to buy it. As more farmers started to grow sugar to make money, it became more affordable for everyone to buy. Sugar was farmed on sugar plantations. A plantation is a large piece of land that farms one type of crop. A plantation usually has a main house for the landowner. Sugar plantations became more common throughout the world because more people wanted sugar and because Europeans colonized the New World and had more places to grow sugar cane.



Beginning in **1493**, Europeans developed sugar plantations in the Caribbean Islands and in South America. The owners of the plantations arrived in the Americas, claimed the land, and started planting sugar cane. However, it was hard work making sugar. Most of this work was first done by indigenous people who were enslaved by the Europeans when they arrived to the Americas. But, the Europeans brought with them diseases that indigenous peoples did not have immunity to and this devastated their population. Between the 1500s and 1700s, it is estimated that over 80% of the indigenous people died because of disease and warfare. Over that time, sugar plantation owners bought, sold, and enslaved people from Africa to do the work.