

Indigo in the South Carolina Lowcountry: A Brief Synopsis

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- There are many species of indigo in the genus *Indigofera* found worldwide. Most true indigo species flourish in tropical areas like India, Africa, and Latin America, but some species are subtropical.
- The indigo species domesticated in ancient India (*Indigofera tinctoria*) was available in Medieval Europe but didn't become popular there until the 17th century. Europeans traditionally used the woad plant (*Isatis tinctoria*) to produce a blue dye, and dying guilds actively resisted the importation of indigo. Through contact with English, French, and Dutch merchants, the Indian species was available in 18th-century South Carolina, where it was usually called "French" or "Hispañola" indigo.
- Spanish colonists cultivated a Latin America indigo (*Indigofera suffruticosa*) from the 1550s onward and exported it to Europe. Thanks to Spanish and Dutch merchants, this species was available in 18th-century South Carolina, where it was usually called "Guatemala" or "Bahama" indigo.
- A subtropical indigo species (*Indigofera caroliniana*) is native to South Carolina and grows in the wild. Colonists experimented with it here in the 18th century, but they found the Indian (*I. tinctoria*) and Guatemalan (*I. suffruticosa*) species produced more dye.
- Indigo seeds came to South Carolina with the first English settlers in 1670, along with a variety of experimental plants. It was grown here briefly before rice became the favored staple crop. Some French Protestant (Huguenot) immigrants to early South Carolina arrived with indigo experience and planted it near the Santee River in the early 1700s.
- Indigo was grown on South Carolina plantations in conjunction with other crops, in plantings ranging in size from just a few acres to more than 80 acres. A few plantations focused solely on indigo, but they were a rare exception that existed for just a brief moment before the American Revolution.
- Indigo's blue dye is obtained by different methods in various cultures. Here, planters steeped indigo leaves and branches in water to precipitate and ferment the natural, clear juices, which were then drained into a second vat and agitated to produce a chemical change into the blue color. After the dyestuff coagulated and settled, the water was drained off and the blue "mud" scooped into bags and forms to drain. The dry blue cakes were then cut into small pieces and packed in barrels for export.
- The commencement of indigo production on a commercial scale in South Carolina commenced in the mid-1740s, during a time of great economic difficulty caused by a decade of war with Spain and France (the "War of Jenkins' Ear" and "King George's War," 1739–48). During that decade, the South Carolina legislature encouraged local planters to experiment with flax, hemp, ginger, olives, oranges, sesame, and indigo to find which plant would prove most profitable for South Carolina and Britain. Indigo won these trials by 1747, and planters generally abandoned the other experimental crops when the British government inaugurated a cash incentive for American indigo in 1749.
- The commercial Indigo cultivation in S.C. quickly declined after 1775, when the Revolution curtailed exports to Britain and the bounty on indigo expired. Some South Carolinians continued to cultivate indigo after the war, but their crop could not compete against superior Spanish and French exports on the international market. The commercial exportation of S.C. indigo ended in the late 1790s.

Indigo in South Carolina: Suggestions for Further Reading

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