THE EXCHANGE OF AGRICULTURAL PLANTS AND
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

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Beginning about 1850 many types of cooperation were pursued by various
groups united by interests transcending national boundaries. These activities,
such as the international meetings of scientists, scholars, and businessmen,
sought to enlarge their knowledge by the exchange of ideas and by cooperation
in pursuit of common goals. In the catalogues of these activities no menti-
on is made of the international exchange of agricultural seeds and plants,
an informal activity in which the United States took quiet but active lead-
ership. Since 1861 a number of international expositions met in the world's
larger cities, beginning at the Crystal Palace in London. At the Agricultural
Exhibition in Paris in 1855 Alexander Vattemare collected over a thousand
varieties of field and garden seeds for the United States Patent Office, the
official depository for such materials. Vattemare later proposed an inter-
national organisation for the exchange of plants but the project was never
formally realised.

The participation of the United States Department of Agriculture in
this informal interchange was begun in 1862 by Isaac Newton, the first
Secretary of Agriculture. Horace Capron, Newton's successor, announced in
1868 that the “system of international agricultural exchanges” had been
established with many governments and with botanical gardens in Europe,
Australia, and South America. It was Capron's intention to extend further
this system of exchange, which promised valuable results to both agriculture
and industry. It was reported in 1869 by the Secretary that the exchanges
had been continued with gratifying success to all concerned. The system in-
cluded nearly three hundred agricultural societies, “chiefly European, but
some of them in Asia, Africa, and South America.”

Frederick Watts, appointed Secretary of Agriculture by President Grant,
continued the system and reported that foreign sources which made the most
valuable contributions included the Kew Gardens of London, the Royal
Gardens of Melbourne, and the Minister of Agricultural Affairs of Austria-
Hungary. The exchange of plant materials was often arranged through
our ministers and consuls in foreign countries. Wheat from Peru was trans-
mited through the American minister there. South American correspondents
of the Department of Agriculture were located in Brazil, Ecuador, Venezuela,
Nicaragua, Mexico, Guatemala, and the United States of Colombia. Seed
exchanged with foreign countries by the Department totalled 3,450 packages
in 1871. Exchange was effective in securing plants rarely for sale by commercial
establishments. In 1877 the Department revealed that the interchange had
become an established custom.

The Secretary of Agriculture in 1877 pointed out that the interchange of
plant materials had greatly promoted friendly relations and that no expense
had paid such high dividends as this in promoting amicable relations. The
introductions of numerous varieties of products from Japan, Korea, and
from the islands of the Pacific also resulted from the custom of exchange.
The informal exchange of seeds and plants is one means used at present by
the Division of Foreign Plant Introduction of the United States Department
of Agriculture.