

George Washington Carver (1864-1943)

George Washington Carver was unique because of his inventiveness and his generosity. He was born on a farm in Missouri where he learned to love nature, especially plants. He also collected rocks. His formal education began when he was twelve years old, but he had to leave the farm to attend a school for black students.

During this point in American history, because of Carver's skin color, it took many years for him to further his education; he was finally admitted to college when he was thirty years old. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in 1894 and a Master of Science degree in 1897. He became the first black faculty member at what is now Iowa State University.

Carver was an agricultural chemist who discovered hundreds of uses for surplus crops. This was important because the South was suffering badly after the Civil War, and Carver wanted to help his fellow Southerners. He once turned down a job offering what would be a million-dollar salary today so he could continue helping farmers and others.

Because farmers had little money, they needed ways to grow and sell inexpensive crops that had many uses. Carver focused on this in his research. He developed a **crop-rotation method** because the popular crops of cotton and tobacco robbed the soil of nutrients, making the land grow less useful with

each crop. Carver urged farmers to plant alternating crops, such as peanuts and peas, which fixed the nitrogen in the soil, between the cotton and tobacco harvests.

The crop-rotation method worked to save the soil but created a large surplus of peanuts; more than livestock needed for feed. To use this extra resource, Carver developed 300 uses for peanuts, including cooking oil, facial soap, shampoo, and ink. Later, Carver found that other crops, such as sweet potatoes, could enrich poor soil. He then developed 115 uses for the sweet potato, as well as seventy-five uses for pecans.

Carver was responsible for turning the South from a cotton-only land to a multicrop land of peanuts, soybeans, sweet potatoes, and pecans. Despite his inventing or improving on hundreds and hundreds of products, including 500 shades of dye, he patented only three inventions. Asked why he did not patent his ideas, he said, "God gave them to me. How can I sell them to someone else?"

In 1943, President Franklin Roosevelt honored Carver with a national monument to honor his achievements. On Carver's tombstone are the words "He could have added fortune to fame, but caring for neither, he found happiness and honor in being helpful to the world."

Exercise:

1. Why did farmers rotate their crops? _____

2. What motivated Carver to invent and create? _____

3. Why didn't Carver patent all his ideas? _____

