

The seeds of genetically modified plants

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Why do some plants have medicinal properties? Is it by coincidence that many of their ingredients have helped cure diseases in humans for millennia? Evolution alone can certainly explain the development of the medicinal properties by plants, since we are herbivores and what we eat has been selected naturally over millions of years to be beneficial to our health. Even other animals instinctively know what to eat to maintain good health.

However, I will assume that some medicinal plants got their properties by some means other than by the process of evolution. For this I will discuss what could happen to plants in the millenniums to come.

Let us go to the year 2200 when humanity would have already started to terra- form the planet Mars and was sending pioneers to colonize the new planet, the earth having already become overcrowded and life progressively undesirable on it. What would the pioneers take with them to such great distances. Personal effects would have to be out of the question, and even clothes would have to be left on earth as would food for consumption on that planet.

What would be the most practical items that pioneers could take with them? Christopher Columbus did not take tons of bananas, cabbages, lemons, oranges, rice, wheat, olives and many other foods to the New World, nor did he bring back tons of corn, potatoes, tomatoes, beans, and many other new foods back to the Old World. Rather he just took one plant or the seeds of each plant in each direction. Therefore I think the pioneers to the planet Mars would be allowed to take only sample seeds of Earth plants with them. They are the lightest items with the greatest potentials, the simplest of which being growing food for their consumption.

The pioneers would need, besides the food they will grow on Mars, medicines to take for the illnesses they will succumb to. How could they take tons of medicines that could go out of date on Mars, or manufacture new supplies on a new planet lacking the technology and raw materials present on Earth?

Plants modified by genetic engineering are already producing, besides many meat like protein foods, many drugs such as 'pharmacologically active proteins, including mammalian antibodies, blood product substitutes, vaccines, hormones, cytokines and a variety of other therapeutic agents' (1) here on Earth . It is only logical to take the seeds of these plants along with them to Mars with instructions telling them the extract of what plant to consume for each illness, and what medicine or vaccine each plant contains.

Let's now go back a few hundred thousand years when some humanoids could have come from another planet to colonize Earth. In a similar manner, they could have brought with them the seeds of genetically modified plants and detailed instructions of how to use them as medicines. This knowledge could have initiated the science of herbal medicines millenniums ago on Earth.

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Reference

(1)D.A. Goldstein and J.A. Thomas, QJM (2004) 97 (11) : 705 – 716.