

# Soy in Our Lives

When someone mentions soy, most of us associate it with tofu. While tofu is one common use of soy, this versatile crop has a multitude of other uses. Soy is often called the miracle crop because of its multi-purpose characteristics. The soybean plant is a legume, like peas, beans, and lentils, and is used in many international cuisines. The soybean pods grow on a leafy, green plant that can range in size from the length of a pencil to the height of a man. Soy is not a new food product; it dates back over 5,000 years when it was originally grown in China. The United States is now the largest producer of soy, with the majority being grown in Midwest states. For years, Illinois has led the nation in soybean production. Soy is planted in the spring, flowers in the summer, and harvested in the fall.

There are edible and non-edible uses for soy. Healthy eating is becoming an important trend in the United States and soy contributes to this with tofu, soymilk, cooking oil, and a wide variety of food items like veggie burgers and other imitation meat products. Soy is one of the few plants which provides all eight amino acids and complete protein essential for human health. Those of us who prefer meat in our diets also benefit from soy, since nearly 85% of the world's soybeans are processed into livestock feed.

The soybeans pods that are not eaten by humans or animals enter our homes in the form of cosmetics, soaps, candles, ink and building insulation, just to name a few of myriad soy products. It is also one of the plants heavily used for bio-diesel, an alternative to use of petroleum.

Soy grown in Illinois contributes to improved nutrition in developing countries. The Illinois Soybean Association was one of the founding organizations of the World Initiative for Soy in Human Health, or WISHH. WISHH works with countries in Africa, Asia, and Central America to educate local communities of the nutritional benefits of soy as well as how to generate income from the crop. Soy is relatively easy to farm, making it an ideal crop to introduce to countries suffering from malnutrition and poverty. Although soy is called the miracle crop due to its versatility, the term takes on a newer, more significant meaning after exploring the changes it is making for people in developing countries.

Soy is an important crop for both our diets and day to day lives. Turn over a bar of soap, or read the back of a veggie burger box, and chances are you will see soy on the list of ingredients. If you're traveling during the May to October growing season, look out your train window and you will see field after field of this vibrant green miracle crop.

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