

Indigo

Although no longer grown in Georgia, indigo was one of the first commercial crops produced in the state. During colonial times, the indigo plant was a primary source of the deep blue dye, indigo, used to color cotton and wool.

Georgia's indigo industry began back in the 1740's when the plant was discussed during a meeting of the Trustees. Botanist, Robert Miller informed the group that indigo was better suited for Georgia's climate than colonies further North. Shortly thereafter, indigo plantings flourished along the state's coast. The crop was well-established along the Ogeechee River and the coastal islands by 1750.

Unlike rice, which required tedious, experienced labor along with a substantial cash outlay, indigo production could be pursued on a family scale. The seeds usually were obtained from Guatemala and planted around the end of March. The crop was harvested for processing when it reached full bloom approximately four months after planting.

The average yield was normally a little more than 40 pounds per acre. With Georgia's long growing season, plantings were often staggered in order to obtain as many as three cuttings during a season.

Although cultivation of indigo was not difficult, processing was an involved, dreaded task; the stalks were claimed to have given off an offensive, sickening odor. The terrible odor and flies associated with processing the stalks prompted the Commons House Assembly to require the residue from the plants be burned or destroyed.

Two wooden vats (12 feet square by four and half feet deep) were needed to process the indigo. After harvest, stalks were placed in a "steeper" vat. Here, fermentation was completed in 12 to 15 hours. The plants were then placed in a "battery" vat and stirred and agitated until a bluish precipitate resulted. Lime water was added to accelerate the formation of this precipitate; once formed, the mixture was allowed to settle eight to ten hours.

To complete processing, water was drained from the vat leaving the precipitate on the bottom; this was strained and pressed until it was water free. The dried indigo was cut into two inch square pieces and dried in a special building.

Indigo blocks were carefully turned three to four times daily to prevent rotting and to check for insect infestation. The finished product was determined by the merchants by observing the closeness of the grains and the degree of brilliance of the violet blue.



Indigo pods