

## MAYAN AGRICULTURE

The Mayas used a variety of methods to obtain food. Which method they used depended on their location, since, for instance, methods used in the forest regions did not work in the swamps.

The earliest Mayas were hunters and gatherers. They fished and hunted for food. Wild animals they hunted included birds, rabbits, monkeys, and deer. The Mayas also picked or gathered wild fruits, nuts, and vegetables, but hunting and gathering alone could not provide enough food as the population increased. The Mayas then had to plant crops to survive.

A method known as slash and burn is one of the oldest methods of farming. Men cut forests down with stone axes and then let the trees dry thoroughly. The men

then burned the dried trees to clear the land. The ashes provided fertilizer for the soil. The Mayas planted seeds, mainly maize or corn, using a planting stick. The farmers used the stick to make a hole in the soil and put three or four seeds into each hole.

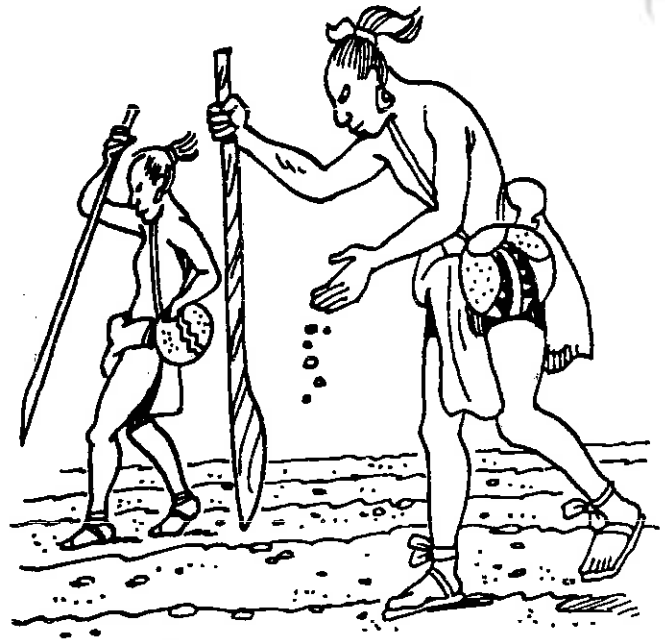
The slash and burn method wore out the soil quickly. The fields had to be in fallow, or at rest, for two or three years before replanting. In addition to planting field crops, the Mayas also had fruit orchards and vegetable gardens.

Mayas raised a variety of crops. In addition to maize, they grew beans, chilis and other peppers, squashes, tomatoes, avocados, and pumpkins. In some regions at the edges of the empire, they grew cacao plants. The cacao plant was hard to grow, and its beans were valuable since they could be made into a Mayan delicacy called chocolate. In addition to food crops, Mayan farmers also grew hemp to make rope and cotton to make cloth.

Water for the crops was always a concern. Droughts often destroyed the crops. The Mayas built water reservoirs using man-made dams and created irrigation systems, but these were on a smaller scale than those of the Incas or Aztecs. They also built some terraces to help stop erosion.

The Mayas developed a special way of growing crops in the swampy areas. Workers dug soil up into mounds. They then planted and harvested the crops on the mound areas. The ditches they dug out provided canals around the mounds for irrigation.

Religion played an important part in Mayan farming. The priests chose the special days for planting and harvesting. The Mayas had special celebrations and rituals in honor of Chac, the god of rain. They believed that he would send the much-needed rain if the celebrations pleased him.



Mayan farmers used planting sticks to make holes in the soil for the seeds. Corn was the main crop of the Mayas.