

The following project by Amsterwald envisions fictional crops in an alternate timeline. Though inspired by Jared Kavanagh's 'red yam' of the Lands of Red and Gold timeline, all of the following is original and supplemented by AI-generated illustrations. The focus is currently on the Americas, Africa and Australia—continents largely lacking in easily domesticable crops—but the scope may be expanded in the future.

AFRICA

LUCKY MALLOW — Central Africa

Corchorus fortunatus

An enriched cousin of the jute mallow, the lucky mallow is prized by Central African civilizations for its nutritious leaves and strong fiber (*pictured*), called ‘mallow-weave’ in English. As a rain-fed tropical crop with little need for intensive care, it has formed the cornerstone of many equatorial civilizations and its value has bestowed a traditional association with luck upon the plant. Beyond the plant’s culinary value, its fiber has spawned entirely new practices of basket-weaving, and its use in the production of strangely durable burlap has bolstered the civilizations able to sow it.



REDNEEDLE — East Africa

Bidens rubra

Like its cousins throughout the *Bidens* genus, redneedle (*pictured*) is a fast-growing plant producing low-value, barbed, needle-like fruits. Distinguished by its unique red blossoms and much less pronounced fruits, it is held dear by East African groups not for its fruits, but for its leaves—redneedle leaves are significantly more nutritious and potent than those of its cousin, black jack (*Bidens pilosa*), and its extracts have been found to be much more effective at preventing malaria.



RIVERMELON — Central Africa

Citrullus purpureus

A variety of melon with a deep purple exterior and lavender interior, the juicy flesh of the rivermelon has sustained the societies of the Congo River for millennia. Very suitable for domestication and an ideal combination of nutrition and culinary value, the rivermelon is prized and well worth its somewhat lengthy growing period. Slices of pale purple melon are welcome reliefs to the choking humidity of equatorial rainforests, and it is even an effective source of pale purple ‘melonwine’.



WHITE AMARANTH — Southern Africa

Amaranthus albidus

White amaranth (*pictured*) is a delicious species of amaranth endemic to Southern Africa. It is distinguished from most forms of amaranth in its white blossoms and pale leaves, which are unusually nutritious, as is its grain. Historically, white amaranth has been much more susceptible to domestication than other variants, and is not to be confused with *Amaranthus albus*, an unrelated species in North America that yields tumbleweeds. Strangely for an amaranth variety, cooking does not appear to diminish the nutritional value of the grain of white amaranth, and it is now employed in a wide range of culinary applications.



AMERICA, NORTH

EASTERN BARK PINE — Appalachia

Pinus nobilis

The eastern bark pine (*pictured*), commonly called the bark pine, is a pine tree found throughout the eastern regions of North America. It has a wide natural range that stretches from the southernmost parts of the Appalachians to Newfoundland. It is chiefly prized for the qualities



of its aromatic bark, which have been widely applied in traditional medicine for its unusually potent anti-inflammatory qualities. Also rich in antioxidants, it can be pulverized and brewed to produce a nutritious and oddly soothing herbal tea used to alleviate sore throats and improve recovery from respiratory illnesses.

FERNWHEAT — American West

Triticum filicatum

The history of ‘fernwheat’ (Spanish: *trigo helecho*), known by a myriad of indigenous names, is clouded. Whether it was an early mutation of wheat brought under uncertain conditions by Spanish conquistadors, or somehow an arrival from the Old World by a trans-Pacific or trans-Atlantic contact not understood by historians, it seems to be the only instance of *Triticum* endemic to the Americas. Well-adapted to the harsh, dry climate of the rain shadow of the Rocky Mountains, it is a staple of the far west of North America and features prominently in indigenous art. A hardy variety of wheat, it was christened ‘fernwheat’ by European settlers for its resemblance to ferns and its grain can be used in the creation of stiff breads that are widely found in both traditional and contemporary cuisines.



BAYA DE CUCHILLOS — Southern North America

Sempruna acuta

In a previously unknown genus named for Mexican botanist Emilio Semprún, the knifeberry (Spanish: *baya de cuchillos*) (pictured) grows on a desert plant of tough, serrated leaves. The harshness of the leaves and pungent sour taste of the berry have together influenced its English name, though a wide variety of traditional names nonetheless circulate for it. In the modern day, candied knifeberry and other desserts utilizing the berry enjoy wide popularity. It serves as a statement piece in traditional cuisines, where drinks and desserts prominently feature its sharp taste.



MISSISSIPPI RICE — Mississippi River Valley

Zizania palustris

Mississippi rice is an alternate path for *Zizania palustris*, considered in our reality to be wild rice. As described in the alternate history timeline [Mississippi Rice](#), it is a ‘much more useful cultivar’ of wild rice developed over millennia in the Mississippi River Valley. In spite of wild rice’s fragility and difficulties in farming, a reliable, nutritious variety was achieved with lengthy selective growth, and now Mississippi rice is capable of being a staple crop and weaving its way as a diverse element in traditional and modern cuisine. Native rice fields (*pictured*) are now a plausible sight in warm, wet areas along the river.



NIPA GRASS — Gulf of California

Distichlis palmeri

Like that of Mississippi rice, the existence of domesticated nipa grass—also called Palmer’s grass—is an alternate history of a real plant, *Distichlis palmeri*. Nipa grass is a saltwater marsh grass in the Gulf of California’s tidal marshes, withstanding low tides with deep roots extending down to wetter strata of soil. Remarkably, in spite of its saline growing conditions, it produces a grain of similar nutrition and flavor to other grains, and is indeed domesticable in its wet, salty climate. An alternate history in which nipa grass is domesticated would provide an entirely new kind of grain, as well as sprawling saltwater farms at the seaside that could give rise to much earlier agricultural civilizations.



AMERICA, SOUTH

NIGHT YAM — The Southern Cone

Ipomoea nocturna

The most prominent endemic crop of the Southern Cone, the night yam is not actually a yam but a variety of sweet potato found in pale purple colors—the English name stems from a later misapplication by European traders. Adapted to slightly drier climates than the wetter north of South America, it has emerged as a staple of traditional cuisine in the Cone, where—like other nutritional tubers—it is extremely versatile in culinary use, and can be roasted, fried, and boiled as potatoes can. As with potatoes, night yams can even be sliced and dried to prepare a flour that can produce pale purple loaves of bread. Among its most interesting innovations is a hearty night yam beer.



RAIN MAHOGANY — Amazon

Swietenia durabilis

The rain mahogany (*pictured*) is a cousin of common mahogany trees with unusual adaptations for the extremely wet conditions of equatorial rainforests. Its wood—commonly called rainwood—is even stronger and more prized than its cousins, and it has played a central role in traditional construction and arts. Statues carved in rainwood, floors layered in it, and furniture shaped from it sell for inordinately high prices, and though it grows over a considerably long period, it is treasured as a luxury good.



AUSTRALIA

RED YAM — Murray River Valley

Dioscorea chelidonia

The red yam is a [borrowing](#) from Jared Kavanagh's *Lands of Red and Gold* timeline. A very abbreviated description of the red yam explains



the plant as ‘a vine with perennial rootstock and foliage . . . It is a fictional species that evolved from certain populations of yellow yam . . . Red yams produce an edible (and very tasty) tuber as a food store. The tubers are formed quite deep in the ground (up to a metre down), and so take a reasonable amount of digging to extract, but the tubers are large enough to justify the effort. In the wild state red yam tubers can grow up to 1 kg in weight (more in wet years); domesticated red yam tubers are often much larger. . . . In culinary terms, the red yam can be cooked in a variety of ways similar to the potato or sweet potato. . . . Red yams are native to the central Murray Valley, but domesticated forms can be grown without too much difficulty in regions of adequate rainfall between latitudes of about 25 to 45 degrees. . . . the red yam does not grow naturally in the wetter areas of Australia’s eastern coast, although domesticated red yams can grow there provided that the soil is well-drained.’ A hybrid between it and the long yam (*Dioscorea transversa*) called the lesser yam is a slightly smaller variant able to better grow in tropical conditions.