

## **A second attempt at domesticating the tomato**

- A.** It took at least 3,000 years for humans to learn how to domesticate the wild tomato and cultivate it for food. Now two separate teams in Brazil and China have done it all over again in less than three years. And they have done it better in some ways, as the re-domesticated tomatoes are more nutritious than the ones we eat at present.

This approach relies on the revolutionary CRISPR genome editing technique, in which changes are deliberately made to the DNA of a living cell, allowing genetic material to be added, removed or altered. The technique could not only improve existing crops, but could also be used to turn thousands of wild plants into useful and appealing foods. In fact, a third team in the US has already begun to do this with a relative of the tomato called the groundcherry.

This fast-track domestication could help make the world's food supply healthier and far more resistant to diseases, such as the rust fungus devastating wheat crops.

'This could transform what we eat,' says Jorg Kudla at the University of Munster in Germany, a member of the Brazilian team. 'There are 50,000 edible plants in the world, but 90 percent of our energy comes from just 15 crops.'

'We can now mimic the known domestication course of major crops like rice, maize, sorghum or others,' says Caixia Gao of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Beijing. 'Then we might try to domesticate plants that have never been domesticated.'

- B.** Meanwhile, Joyce Van Eck at the Boyce Thompson Institute in New York state decided to use the same approach to domesticate the groundcherry or goldenberry (*Physalis pruinosa*) for the first time. This fruit looks similar to the closely related Cape gooseberry (*Physalis peruviana*).

Groundcherries are already sold to a limited extent in the US but they are hard to produce because the plant has a sprawling growth habit and the small fruits fall off the branches when ripe. Van Eck's team has edited the plants to increase fruit size, make their growth more compact and to stop fruits dropping. 'There's potential for this to be a commercial crop,' says Van Eck. But she adds that taking the work further would be expensive because of the need to pay for a licence for the

CRISPR technology and get regulatory approval.

- C. This approach could boost the use of many obscure plants, says Jonathan Jones of the Sainsbury Lab in the UK. But it will be hard for new foods to grow so popular with farmers and consumers that they become new staple crops, he thinks.

The three teams already have their eye on other plants that could be ‘catapulted into the mainstream’, including foxtail, oat-grass and cowpea. By choosing wild plants that are drought or heat tolerant, says Gao, we could create crops that will thrive even as the planet warms.

But Kudla didn’t want to reveal which species were in his team’s sights, because CRISPR has made the process so easy. ‘Any one with the right skills could go to their lab and do this.’