Human error could have disastrous consequences, especially when shipments of plants were held indefinitely by French customs. On 30 August 1786, Laurent wrote a lengthy letter detailing his search for a missing crate of plants. This shipment from India was lost somewhere along its long journey to France. Thouin asked Laurent to search for the crate in Brest, and Laurent immediately went on the hunt for the missing package.\(^1\) In the 30 August 1786 letter, Laurent detailed all the mishaps that occurred during his search. Laurent writes that after speaking to Mr. de Beaupreau, the Intendant of the Navy, “he told me that two days prior, an officer named Mr. Chabon had also claimed a crate of plants coming from India; that having searched in the port’s customs dock, they found two boxes instead of one…”\(^2\) Sending crates filled with plants from India was common enough that there were multiple boxes still waiting to be claimed. The crates had not been properly labelled and were immediately taken to the customs office. Upon hearing that an officer had found and opened the two crates, he asked the Intendant for permission to speak to him directly. When Laurent found him, Chabon stated “All the plants were reduced to nothing more than rot, there were also seeds closed in clay vases which were reduced to dust, […] we threw everything in the middle of the port.”\(^3\) It was incredibly difficult to guarantee that shipments of plants and seeds would survive long oceanic voyages. And arriving in France did not a guarantee that they would make it to their intended recipient.

How long had these plants been in Brest before Laurent and Chabon searched for them? According to Chabon’s testimony, the crates had been in Brest for months. The plants had been transported first to Pondicherry where they were put onto a ship that set sail down the Indian Ocean along the coast of West Africa. They were then transferred onto another ship at L’Ile de Bourbon before arriving in France. In his testimony to Laurent, Chabon states that the officers from the ship had not been seen in Brest for quite a while.\(^4\) While someone had transferred the crates onto another ship at l’Ile Bourbon, the same care was not made when they arrived in Brest. It is not surprising then that when Chabon opened up the two cases, he saw plants that had “turned to rot.”\(^5\) This letter provides us with a detailed account of the voyage these plants took, from Pondicherry all the way to L’Ile de Bourbon, and finally to their resting place in Brest, giving us a visual representation of how organic materials often wasted away during these lengthy sea voyages.

Imbedded in this story of the missing crates was a description of how plants and seeds were frequently packaged by France’s colonial actors. Chabon told Laurent that inside the two boxes, the plants “were arranged by laying them in the boxes, and after one layer of shrubs, there was a layer of earth on top, and this [was continued] until the box was full.”\(^6\) By covering these plants with dirt, the hope was that they would not be drowned by the salt water, which often

\(^1\) BCMHN, MS 569, Laurent to Thouin, 30 August 1786, Brest.
\(^2\) BCMHN, MS 569, Laurent to Thouin, 30 August 1786, Brest.
\(^3\) BCMHN, MS 569, Laurent to Thouin, 30 August 1786, Brest.
\(^4\) BCMHN, MS 569, Laurent to Thouin, 30 August 1786, Brest.
\(^5\) BCMHN, MS 569, Laurent to Thouin, 30 August 1786, Brest.
\(^6\) BCMHN, MS 569, Laurent to Thouin, 30 August 1786, Brest.