

Anyone who's ever dropped a coin into a slot machine recognizes those cheerful cherries and bright lemons spinning around the reels. But why fruit? And why those particular icons? As a former slot attendant and floor tech who's spent over a decade around slot cabinets, coin mechanisms, hoppers, and the sounds of spinning reels, I can tell you there's a fascinating story behind these colorful symbols. It's a tale intertwined with the evolution of automation, marketing, and the transition from mechanical to electromechanical machines that shaped the slot machine industry as we know it.

The Origins: Coin Mechanisms and Automated Play

Before we talk about fruit symbols, it's important to understand the role of automation in the birth of slot machines. Early gambling devices were manually operated and complex, but the breakthrough came with the introduction of coin mechanisms. I've seen this play out countless times: wished they had known this beforehand.. These mechanical devices automatically accepted a coin, triggered the [mobile slots portrait mode](#) reels to spin, and paid out winnings without the need for an attendant. This was a game-changer.

Automation meant that the machines had to provide outcomes that were instantly readable. This is where the three-reel template and simple, recognizable symbols came into play.

The Three-Reel Template: Readability and Simplicity

The earliest slot machines, like the famous Liberty Bell developed by Charles Fey in the late 19th century, adopted the three-reel template to simplify gameplay and payout calculation. With three spinning reels, each stopping to show a symbol, players could quickly see if they'd won without any complicated payline charts or confusing rules.

To complement this, the symbols themselves needed to be:

- **Simple and easily distinguishable:** Players should be able to recognize them at a glance.
- **Visually appealing:** Bright colors help catch the eye to draw in players.
- **Standardized:** This allowed for easy layout of payouts and internal mechanisms to detect wins.

Cherries, lemons, oranges, and plums fulfilled these requirements perfectly—they were brightly colored, distinct from each other, and widely recognizable to players around the world. Over time, these fruit symbols became standard iconography on slot machines, a design choice that has remained remarkably consistent for over 100 years.

Fruit Symbols and Trade Stimulators: A Closer Look

Here's where it gets really interesting. Some of the earliest slot machines—sometimes called "trade stimulators"—were used not primarily to gamble but to encourage purchases or promote products, especially in soda fountains, bars, and confectionery shops. These machines often paid out chewing gum or candy rather than cash. That's where the connection to fruit icons deepens.

Trade Stimulator Feature Description Relation to Fruit Symbols Location Placed in bars, soda fountains, and candy shops Fruit flavors associated with popularity in these venues Prize Type Non-cash prizes like gum or candy Fruit symbols represented flavors and prizes Legal Circumvention Allowed machines to operate without gambling laws applying since cash payout was avoided Fruit icons helped signal these machines weren't purely gambling devices

By linking the icons to gum or candy flavors, manufacturers gave players non-cash "payouts," which helped slot machines skirt gambling regulations in many areas. Cherries, lemons, and other fruits were effectively branding devices for the trade stimulators. The connection became so strong that even after cash payouts were introduced, the fruit symbols stayed on as a nod to tradition and player familiarity.

The BAR Symbol: A Legacy of Gum Pack Branding

The BAR symbol commonly seen on slot machine reels might puzzle some as it doesn't look like a fruit at all. But this too has roots in that early era of trade stimulators.

In the 1920s, a company called Bell-Fruit Gum Company produced slot machines that awarded gum as prizes. The BAR symbol came from their company logo, which was printed as a "bar" on the gum packages. This simple graphic was easy to reproduce mechanically and quickly identifiable to players, much like the fruit symbols.

The BAR became a permanent fixture on slot machines, alongside cherries and lemons, creating the iconic triad of slot imagery. It blended commercial branding with gambling iconography in a way that still resonates today.



Transition to Electromechanical Machines and Bigger Payouts

As technology progressed, the slot machine industry moved beyond pure mechanical devices into electromechanical machines in the mid-20th century. This transition allowed for more complex features, more reels, bigger potential payouts, and more sophisticated payout mechanisms like hoppers that dispensed coins automatically.

Despite these innovations, the fruit and BAR symbols persisted. Why? Because they had become hardwired into players' expectations and the aesthetics of slots. Plus, the basic meaning of these symbols remained clear and effective. They guided players' understanding of outcomes immediately, without explanations—a crucial feature for machines that needed quick resolution.

During this electromechanical era, machines began offering larger payoffs, sometimes with multiple coins or tokens. The presence of familiar fruit symbols tied the newer machines back to their mechanical roots, bridging generations of players.



What Stayed the Same and What Changed

Over the decades, here's what I find fascinating about the cherries, lemons, and other fruit symbols on slot machines:

- **What stayed the same:** Bright colors, easy recognition, and the nostalgic charm that players immediately connect with to this day.
- **What changed:** Mechanical reels became electronic video displays, payouts shifted from gum and candy to coins, tickets, and digital credits, and machines went from single line to multi-line, multi-payline games.

But the fruit lives on, proof that some design elements are simply too iconic to retire.

Final Thoughts

The presence of cherries and lemons on slot machines isn't just a random design choice or leftover from an ancient tradition. It's the result of an intricate interplay between automation technology, the need for clear and readable outcomes on the classic three-reel format, clever marketing via trade stimulators, legal navigation through non-cash gum payouts, and branding from companies like Bell-Fruit Gum.

Even as slot machines have evolved dramatically—from mechanical to electromechanical to fully digital—the fruit symbols remain one of the few constants. They are at once a practical design solution, a nostalgic callback, and a vibrant icon of slot machine history.

The next time you hear the clack-clack-clack of the reels spinning or see cherries lining up on the payline, remember: you're witnessing a tradition that's been decades in the making, wrapped up in the simple joy of fruit flavors and flashing lights.