

# Did You Know?

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## Vanilla *Vanilla* spp.

- The vanilla plant, in the Orchidaceae (Orchid) family, is a vine-like plant that is primarily epiphytic (supported by tree branches). It is native to Mexico and Central America. The Mayans were the first to intentionally grow vanilla and flavor their chocolate beverages with it. It was also cultivated by the Totonac people along the eastern coast of Mexico since at least 1185, who first supplied the region with vanilla and then for export. Vanilla is now grown throughout the tropics.
- Vanilla produces the only edible fruit in the orchid family, of which there are over 25,000 species and 100,000 hybrids. *Vanilla planifolia* is the one primarily grown commercially. Other species such as *V. tahitiensis* and *V. pompona* are also grown.
- The Aztecs in Mexico also used vanilla for flavoring food and beverages, including a cold cocoa drink. Vanilla is thought to have minimized the bitterness of the cocoa drink.
- Vanilla was unknown outside of Central America until Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortés brought it to Europe in the 1520's. Initially, it was consumed in a hot chocolate beverage, which predates the consumption of coffee and tea in Europe.
- Thomas Jefferson learned about vanilla while serving as ambassador to France in the 1780s and is credited for bringing it back to America. While there, he developed a fondness for vanilla ice cream.
- Commercially grown vanilla crop is labor and time intensive, making it the second highest priced spice (after saffron).
- Flowers appear on the vines generally in the second to third year of growth. The flower only blooms for one day and is pollinated by hand when grown commercially. The beans take about nine months to mature.
- There has been a lot of study to determine the native pollinator(s). Orchid bees (from the genus *Eulaema*) are one species that have been observed.
- The vanilla plant had been transported to other places around the world, but pods did not grow. A 12-year-old slave boy named Edmund Albius from the Réunion Island discovered how to pollinate the flower by hand in 1841. This paved the way to production in other countries.

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- Vanilla flowers are large and fragrant. The beans have no aroma when growing or harvested. The familiar fragrance develops when they are cured and dried, as they go from green to brown.
- The harvesting and processing of vanilla beans includes the following steps: sorting and grading the beans, a cycle of sweating the beans in large containers at night and drying in the sun, followed by curing on racks for a few weeks. It takes at least three months to get from harvest through the curing process.
- Vanilla from the Madagascar region or Bourbon Island near Madagascar is known as Madagascar or Bourbon vanilla or Bourbon-Madagascar. It is named for the origin, not the alcohol. It has a rich and creamy flavor and are the thinnest of the three types of beans.
- Tahitian vanilla is a different species of the vanilla plant which has a more floral and fruitier flavor. They are the darkest in color and very fragrant, though not as flavorful as the other two types.
- Mexican vanilla has a smooth, rich, creamy, and spicy flavor. They are typically produced in the Veracruz area of Mexico.
- Imitation vanilla is a synthetic, which replicates only one of the 250 naturally occurring flavor compounds in true vanilla. It will retain its flavor at higher temperatures than natural vanilla.
- Vanilla extract is made by steeping beans in 35% alcohol. Commercially, it can also contain sugar, glycerin, propylene glycol, dextrose, and/or corn syrup.
- Vanilla has historic health properties including antioxidant, anticarcinogenic, antidepressant, fever-reducing, and sedative qualities. The Mexican Aztecs used vanilla to address hysteria and depression. Additional uses have been cited through the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, including the “exhilarate the brain” and to increase muscular energy.

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