

The East London Garden Society

Plant Facts

Vanilla



Vanilla beans (*Vanilla Planifolia*) are long thin pods from a variety of orchid that is grown on a commercial scale in Madagascar, India, Indonesia, Puerto Rico and the West Indies. When opened, the pods are waxy and dark, filled with little brown specks and emit a sweet fragrance.

There are three types of vanilla beans: Bourbon-Madagascar, Mexican and Tahitian.

Bourbon-Madagascar vanilla is a thin pod with a rich and sweet flavour, the sweetest of the three. Mexican vanilla tastes smooth and rich, whilst Tahitian vanilla has the thickest and darkest coloured pod that's aromatic but not as flavourful. Once vanilla pods are handpicked from the plant, they are dipped immediately in boiling water to stop growth, heated under the sun and wrapped to sweat at night for up to twenty days.

To develop that distinct vanilla scent and taste, pods are air-dried and fermented for four to six months, producing the vanilla beans with which most of us are familiar.

The first people to have cultivated it are the Totonacs of Mexico's east coast. The Aztecs acquired vanilla when they conquered the Totonacs in the 15th Century. The Spanish, in turn, got it when they conquered the Aztecs. The Aztecs drank their chocolate with a dash of vanilla and Europeans, once they got used to it, followed suit.

Vanilla was thought of as nothing more than an additive for chocolate until the early 17th Century when Hugh Morgan, a creative apothecary in the employ of Queen Elizabeth I invented chocolate-free, all-vanilla-flavoured sweetmeats. The Queen adored them and by the next century, the French were using vanilla to flavour ice cream, a treat discovered by Thomas Jefferson in the 1780s, when he lived in Paris as American Minister to France.

In the 19th century, demand for vanilla climbed sharply. Not only was it the established flavour of choice for ice cream, but it was an essential ingredient of soft drinks including John S Pemberton's Coca-Cola which went on sale in 1886 and was impressively advertised as an *esteemed Brain tonic and Intellectual Beverage*.

The problem with vanilla is that it is pricey. Vanilla is the second most expensive spice in the world because its production is so labour-intensive. Vanilla grows as a clinging vine, reaching lengths of up to 300 feet from which sprout pale greenish-yellow flowers about four inches in diameter. Each flower remains open for just 24 hours, after which, if not pollinated it wilts, dies, and drops to the ground. Because of the narrow window of opportunity, the very existence of vanilla seems like an evolutionary long shot.

If pollination is successful, a fruit develops in the form of a six to ten-inch-long pod, filled with thousands of minuscule black seeds. Transplants of vanilla began to appear in tropical and in vanilla-friendly regions around the globe. However, due to a lack of bees they remained without pods until 1841 when Edmond Albius, a twelve-year-old boy on the island of Réunion, figured out how to hand pollinate the vanilla blooms using a stick and a flip of the thumb.

This simple technique had far reaching implications. Vanilla plantations sprang up across the globe from Madagascar to India, Tahiti, and Indonesia. Today about seventy-five percent of the world's vanilla comes from Madagascar and Réunion.