

Did You Know?



Vanilla, *Vanilla* spp.

- The vanilla plant is in the Orchidaceae (Orchid) family and it is native to Central America.
- Vanilla produces the only edible fruit in the orchid family, of which there are over 25,000 species and 100,000 hybrids.
- It was unknown to the rest of the world until Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortes brought it back to Spain from Mexico in the 16th century.
- Thomas Jefferson learned about vanilla while serving as ambassador to France and is credited for bringing it back to America.
- The vanilla plant is a vine that is both terrestrial (growing along the ground) and epiphytic (supported by a tree or branches).
- The vanilla crop is labor and time intensive. Flowers appear on the vines generally in the third year of growth, then the fruit require nine months on the vine before harvest.
- 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. This paved the way to production in other countries.
- The vanilla flower blooms for just one morning. During that time, it must be pollinated, either by hand commercially or by an insect in the wild, to produce a pod.
- Vanilla 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 for a total of up to 30 days.
- Vanilla from the Madagascar region or Bourbon Island near Madagascar is known and Madagascar or Bourbon vanilla. It is named for the origin, not the alcohol.
- Tahitian vanilla is a different species of the vanilla plant which has a more floral and fruity flavor.
- Mexican vanilla has a smooth, creamy, and spicy flavor.

Did You Know?



- Imitation vanilla is a synthetic, which replicates only one of the 250 naturally occurring flavor compounds in true 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 18th and 19th centuries, including the “exhilarate the brain” and to increase muscular energy.