

BORDER CROSSINGS

ORIGINS

BOTANY BAY LEARNING RESOURCES

Vanilla



Illustration of *Vanilla planifolia*, "Curtis's Botanical Magazine" (1891).

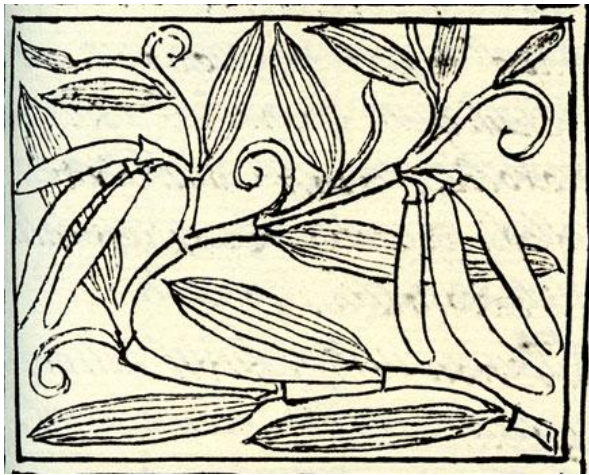
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vanilla_planifolia_-_Curtis%27_117_\(Ser._3_no._47\)_pl_7167_\(1891\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vanilla_planifolia_-_Curtis%27_117_(Ser._3_no._47)_pl_7167_(1891).jpg)

What do Indigenous people call this plant?

The Maya word for vanilla is "zizbic", and it was used with copal resin as incense. The name "tlixochitl" (meaning 'black pod') is used by the Aztec people. The Spanish called it "vainilla" (meaning 'little pod'). The English word vanilla comes from the Spanish name.

When was this plant first documented?

Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún described vanilla and its uses in the Florentine Codex which was published in the late 1500s in both Spanish and Nahuatl languages.



*palhoacan, motlapalhoavana,
motlappoava.
Tlilsuhtli, mecatli, memecatli.
pipitzaoac: iniquauhio iuhquijn
tekitzilin, movicomarj, moiac
tlacanj, exoio, injexoio xoxotli:
inoactliltic, tzohtlactic, itioxi,
malic xiac tlacati maniztic, ma*

Drawing of the Vanilla plant from the Florentine Codex

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanilla#/media/File:Vanilla_florentine_codex.jpg

How many varieties of this plant are known?

There are over 150 varieties of vanilla. All of them are descended from the original version originally from Mesoamerica - parts of what we now call Mexico. The three most popular and widely used varieties are: vanilla planifolia, vanilla tahitiensis, and vanilla pompona.

Where and how was the plant originally grown and used?

Vanilla vines are planted and cultivated carefully as vanilla was used in religious ceremonies and in medicine by the Totonac people in what is now Mexico. The vines grow several feet tall using trees to support them. The flowers are pollinated by insects and also by hand. Once the vanilla pods have turned black, they are picked and heated to stop them from rotting, then the pods are dried and boxed for 3 months.

How do Indigenous people relate to this plant?

In pre-Hispanic times, the Totonac were conquered by the Aztecs who developed a taste for vanilla. As well as taking payments of vanilla as tribute, the Aztecs also began growing vanilla themselves.

Vanilla has not just been used as a flavouring. Vanilla is used by the Aztec people as a perfume and to treat upset stomachs, indigestion, lice infestations, body odour and fevers. It has also been used as an aphrodisiac and a good luck charm for travellers.

However, vanilla can also cause skin irritation and insomnia if too much is taken.

When and how did this plant first come to Britain?

The Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés is considered responsible for bringing vanilla and chocolate to Europe in the 1520s. Vanilla was popular and initially considered an aphrodisiac. It was added to many recipes and became widely used across Europe. Through trade, it spread around the world and is now grown extensively in Madagascar, Tahiti and Mexico.

Special properties

The Maya mix vanilla with copal resin to use as incense (the word 'copal' is derived from the Nahuatl language word copalli, meaning 'incense'). Vanilla is also used to treat insect bites and heal minor wounds. Copal resin is still used by many Indigenous peoples of Mexico and Central America as an incense during both sweat lodge ceremonies and sacred mushroom ceremonies.

The Aztecs are thought to have been the first to use vanilla as a flavouring, adding it to cacao beans to make their chocolate drink.

Fun facts

Vanilla is the second most expensive spice in the world (after saffron) because it is so labour intensive to produce.

Vanilla pods were so prized by the Aztecs they could be used as a form of currency to pay taxes to the emperors.

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BOTANY BAY is a participation and learning project by Border Crossings' ORIGINS Festival, made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Thanks to National Lottery players, we have been able to engage five schools across the country with the Indigenous heritage of plants, gardens and food.



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