



PLANT FACT SHEET

Vanilla planifolia Andrews

GENUS *Vanilla* FAMILY Orchidaceae

COMMON NAMES Vanilla

EDIBLE PARTS AND USES

Edible parts: Pods, Fruit, Seeds, Herb, Spice

The pods are used to flavour foods. The flavour is extracted in alcohol. They are used to flavour chocolate, ice cream, milk shakes, and sweet dishes.

DESCRIPTION

A climbing orchid. The vine is fleshy and climbs by means of roots. It can climb to 10-15 m high. It is 1-2 cm across and flexible but easily broken. There are 5-15 cm between nodes. It is often trained to a lower height to allow easier pollination and harvesting. Aerial roots arise from the stem opposite the leaves. These are white and 2 mm across. They attach to supports. It has long pointed fleshy leaves. They have almost no stalk and can be 8-25 cm long by 2-8 cm wide. The tip of the leaf is pointed and the base is rounded. The flowers are greenish yellow and large and waxy. They occur in groups of up to 30 in the axils of the leaves. The fruit is a long fleshy pod with small black seeds inside.

HABITAT

A tropical plant. It needs a warm moist climate. The best temperature is between 21-32°C with an average around 27°C. It will grow up to at least 1,000 m altitude. It does best with an evenly distributed rainfall of 2,000-5,000 mm per year. Ideally it should have 2 drier months to allow the flowers to develop. Light shade is necessary. It needs a well drained location and lots of humus and organic matter to grow in. It suits hardiness zones 11-12.

PRODUCTION

Cultivation

Plants are grown from cuttings in a layer of rotting plant material and forest debris. It needs a pole to climb and should have light shade. When the vine extends along a branch it is pulled down to promote flowering. The flowers need to be hand pollinated in the early morning. It is most successful on a sunny morning following rain. Using a small match sized stick the pollen is removed by squeezing the flower then putting the pollen onto the sticky stigma. Flowering tends to be seasonal and occur once per year during the drier months. If fertile cross-pollinated seed is required, it is necessary to cross pollinate the plants. (In Mexico small bees in the genus *Melapona* naturally pollinate vanilla)

Harvesting and Seed Production

Fertilised flowers produce pods in 6 weeks. The pods are ready for harvest about 9 months after pollination. This is indicated by the pods turning slightly yellow at the end. The beans are partly dried and allowed to sweat to increase flavour. They are normally sweated for 2-3 weeks then dried. They become dark brown in colour.

NOTES

There are about 50 Vanilla species.

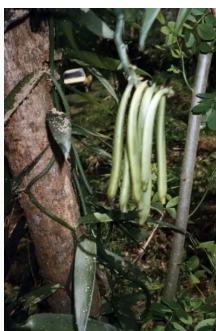
PICTURES



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