



Plain Vanilla? You Might Be Surprised

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(CBS) *This story was written by* **This story was written by CBSNews.com's Gina Pace.**

By

The vanilla plant sprung from the blood of a doomed princess and prince who were killed for their forbidden love, according to ancient folklore.

Spanish treasure ships brought back not only gold, but also vanilla and chocolate from the Latin America. Hundreds of years later, vanilla is still a prized commodity on the world market. It can fetch up to \$500 a kilogram.

Hailed in the 1800s for its medicinal properties and currently loved as the most popular flavor of ice cream, much about vanilla, which is a species of orchid, remains a mystery.

"It's a plant that brings so much pleasure, but we know very little about," said Kenneth Cameron, director of the Cullman program for molecular systematics at the New York Botanical Garden.

The garden is shedding more light on the enigmatic flower as well as 8,000 other orchid plants at the 2006 Orchid Show, running through April 2. Special events are planned throughout the exhibit's run, such as lectures on how to care for Orchids, flower photography, and chocolate and vanilla activities for children.

Few people – even flower lovers -- know that vanilla is an orchid, said Eric Elsberry, the managing director of the Arizona Vanilla Company, who spoke at the garden, but the plant has long been prized throughout the world.

Mexico was the leading producer of vanilla until the plant was moved to tropical French colonies for cultivation. The only problem, Cameron said, is that the insect that pollinates the plant wasn't moved with it. Plants were flowering, but the vanilla bean was not being produced, until, in 1841, a 12-year-old slave in Reunion discovered the plants could be pollinated by hand by pushing back a membrane that separates the male and female organs of the hermaphrodite plant.

Only three types of vanilla species are cultivated, which vary in price and quality. Unlike plants such as tomatoes or bananas, vanilla has not gone through any selective breeding process that would create different varieties. Cameron said there are possibilities find new varieties of vanilla that could be cultivated, and for experimental breeding, which have yet to be explored.

But, vanilla is only one variety of orchid, a group of flowers famous for its diversity. Orchidmania was explored in Susan Orleans' bestseller "The Orchid Thief" and subsequently the movie "Adaptation." The draw is clear. With as many as 30,000 species, the incredibly varied plants have varieties that Orleans describes as looking like "butterflies, bats, ladies handbags," or like an "ethereal and beautiful flying white frog."

This year, the garden decided to recreate the feeling of a garden from 1920s South Florida for the main show, highlighting big blocks of color in a formal display, with flowers cascading into a fountain. In another section of the garden, orchids climb up tropical trees in a humid rainforest.

Marc Hachadourian, the curator of glasshouse collections at the garden, said orchids never fail to attract attention, whether it be the bright color of the Vandas, which are also called Rainbow Orchids, or the unique, delicate shape of the slipper orchid.

"Everyone seems to have their favorites, and sometimes it changes by the minute as they walk through the show," he said. "Orchids have a longstanding history of being surrounded with legend and lore, a reputation for being exotic and beautiful."

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