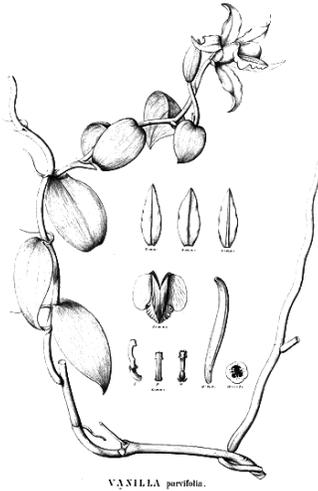


Vanilla Orchid



Natural vanilla comes from the seed pod of an orchid plant. *Vanilla planifolia* is a vigorous, vining orchid that can reach up to 300 feet.

Keep the plant in a warm, brightly lit area with plenty of water.

The vanilla plant starts producing fruit only when it is mature, generally larger than 10 feet. The vine produces greenish-yellow flowers at the leaf axils, in clusters from which one or two open at a time over a two week period. They are short lived and must be pollinated during the first day when they are fully open and most receptive. Fruit pods grow to about 6-9 inches long and are harvested in about 8-9 months after flowering.

To pollinate the vanilla use two toothpicks. Remove the entire pollen cap from under the hooded anther on top of the column with one and place it on a clean piece of paper. Now rub the end of the toothpick on the hairlike portion of the frilled petal lip. Its sticky secretion acts as an adhesive in picking up the pollinia. The drawing shows where to find the pollinia in the pollen cap. Pick it up with the sticky toothpick.

Pry and hold open the top flap of the rostellum with the other toothpick. Place the sticky end of the first toothpick (with pollinia) up and into the stigmatic opening under the rostellum flap. Remove the toothpicks and the rostellum flap snaps closed, trapping the pollinia.

The seed pods, or "beans", will take six to nine months to mature and should grow up to nine inches in length. Beans are ready to harvest when the green tips begin to turn yellow. They will have no vanilla fragrance until the curing process activates the enzymes and produces vanillin.

Kill the seeds by placing them in boiling water for about two minutes. Find a piece of clean wool and lay the pods on the cloth in the morning sun. About noon wrap the pods in the cloth, allowing them to sweat. Put them in an airtight box overnight. Repeat the process until the pods shrink, turn dark brown, and give off a slight vanilla odor. They will be very rubbery at this stage. Store the pods in a container that is air tight and light proof.

Discard the beans if they split or develop mold since the mold may develop a toxic substance. Prevent mold by daily rubbing the beans dry with a cotton cloth.

To use the beans, boil them in water for about 15 minutes. Split the beans lengthwise with a knife several times, then place 5 to 6 beans in a 750 ml bottle of vodka or bourbon for thirty days. If you wish, you can add more vodka or bourbon as the vanilla extract is used.

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