

## Mexican Vanilla in Philately.

by Aida Téllez-Velasco. Institute of Biology, Botanic Garden.  
Autonomous National University of Mexico



Vanilla (*Vanilla planifolia*) is an orchid originating in the tropical forests of Mexico, Central America and possibly the Antilles.

Before the arrival of the Spanish in America, the Totonac people of the Veracruz region of eastern Mexico considered vanilla a sacred plant and cult object. They called it *Xanath*. It was supplied to the Aztecs in trade and as tribute. The Aztecs, who called vanilla *Tlixochitl*, appreciated it as an enhancement to the cocoa drink that was given to their nobles and warriors. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Totonacas were the principle producers of vanilla; after that time the French discovered the means of manual pollinization.

The conquistador Hernan Cortes took American plants back to Europe around 1519, and during the 17<sup>th</sup> century vanilla became a prized and high-priced commodity throughout Europe. The courts of England and France were the chief consumers.

Vanilla is a climbing plant that uses its roots to cling to trees, but it does not harm the tree. The plant has a green, fleshy cylindrical stem between 1-2 cms in diameter. The leaves that grow from the nodes on the stem are thick, waxy and fleshy, each growing at a different level on the stem.

The flowers are pale green or yellow, measuring 7.5 cm in width. They appear, in racemes of 15-20 flowers, from March to May in the northern hemisphere, or from September to December in the southern hemisphere. Several flowers open at the same time and stay open for 5-6 hours, withering if they are not pollinated. Under commercial cultivation, the flowers are pollinated by hand. The ovary near the base of the flower swells and forms a fruit. The immature fruit takes the form of a green sheath, almost triangular in section, 15 cms long and 15-20 mm wide. When it reaches its maximum growth, three months after the flower was pollinated, it can weigh 25g. Harvest of the pods takes place in November and the craft process of curing begins. During this long drying process the green pod changes to a dark brown, almost black. The metabolism of enzymes intensifies its essential oil, vainillin, developing the typical taste and aroma of vanilla.

Vanilla is commercialised as several products; pods are sold whole or in powdered form or as a mixture of powder and sugar. Essence is extracted with 35% alcohol mixed with sugar and a fixative.

Vanilla is the only orchid cultivated for flavouring and aromatising, rather than for ornamental purposes. It is used in many industries such as food, alcoholic beverages, soft drinks, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, perfumery, and the tobacco industry. It is also considered to have medicinal properties.



Vanilla is one among many legacies from Mexico to the world that has appeared on a postal stamp issued in 1980 by the Mexican postal services, showing its flower and fruit (*Tlixochitl Vanilla Planifolia*).

The National Committee in the Fight against Tuberculosis and Respiratory Diseases in Mexico issued a series of *Flowers of Mexico* non-postal charity stamps in 1973-74 and included the vanilla orchid.