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## **Edible Expeditions** **Food Goes Wild in a New Exhibition about Edible Plants** **at San Francisco's Conservatory of Flowers**

**May 7 – November 1, 2009**

SAN FRANCISCO – Vanilla, chocolate, coffee and curry – easy to find in the grocery store aisle, but how about in the jungle? This summer, the Conservatory of Flowers in San Francisco offers visitors a chance to see their food in the wild in a new exhibition called Edible Expeditions on view May 7 – November 1, 2009. It's a discovery journey of edible plants from around the world full of surprises about the treats we eat.

Arranged in lush demonstration gardens, Edible Expeditions highlights the many delicious products from tropical countries that we enjoy. Over 50 species of popular and lesser-known plants will be displayed by geographic distribution.

Featured in the North American garden is the reigning king of candy – chocolate. The *cacao* tree is a native of the deep tropics of the Americas. This small evergreen tree produces bright orange fruit pods full of the seeds from which chocolate is made. The scientific name *Theobroma* means “food of the gods”, a reflection of the central role this plant played in the creation stories of ancient Mesoamerican cultures. *Cacao* beans became so important in the Aztec empire that they were used as currency.

And while visitors may all know the sweet delight of the *cacao*, they may be surprised to discover the chocolate pudding tree, also known as black sapote, native to Mexico and Guatemala. The meat of the apple-sized fruits actually looks and tastes something like chocolate pudding and is enjoyed right off the tree or processed into ice cream, sweet beverages and more.

Visitors will also encounter another staple of the kingdom of sweets – vanilla. This fleshy vining plant is actually an orchid -- the only orchid, in fact, that is widely used in the kitchen. It can grow up to 300 feet in a tropical setting. The mouth-watering flavor is derived from the black seed pods which have earned the distinction as the second most expensive spice after saffron.

The North American garden also features other sapote species, cherimoya, papaya, pacaya, allspice, banana and more.

In the South American garden, visitors will find the yerba mate plant. All over South America, the leaves and twigs of this plant are enjoyed as a tea-like beverage. From Peru to Argentina, friends regularly sit down to drink mate sipped from a shared hollow gourd through a metal straw.

Also on view is the pineapple -- common today, but at one time a status symbol of the wealthy. Native to Brazil, Columbus is thought to have been the first European to encounter the succulent fruit. He brought it back to Spain and soon European royal families developed a liking for it. Here in America, the pineapple has long been a symbol of hospitality. In colonial times, hostesses would display them on the dining table. So important were they to a successful party that ladies would rent them from the local grocer for the night if they couldn't afford to buy one.

Other plants featured in the South American garden include the ice cream bean, peach palm, guava, a type of edible philodendron and more.

Across the ocean, the Asian garden features the jackfruit, the largest tree borne fruit in the world, seldom less than 10 inches in diameter. Native to India, the jackfruit has been cultivated there as long as 6000 years ago and is now eaten across Asia in a multitude of ways from curry dishes to chips. It is also thought to be the basis of the flavor for Juicy Fruit gum.

From southern China comes the longan tree. In Cantonese, *long-ngan* means dragon eye. One look at the meat of this fruit and you'll know why. When shelled, the black seed shows through the translucent flesh, peering at you like a large eyeball. The fruit is used in a variety of soups,

snacks and sweets and is also used medicinally. Other plants featured in the Asian garden include the Himalayan mulberry, curry, lotus, rice, tumeric and more.

In addition to the living collection of edible plants, the exhibit features short videos that demonstrate how some of these products are processed into the foods we consume, examples of packaged food products from around the world, lovely hand drawn botanical illustrations of many of the edible parts of the plants and interpretive signage that helps visitors understand sustainable agricultural practices for these crops.

Families will enjoy the many hands on Edibilicious activities that allow children to explore tropical roots, fruits, leaves and seeds with their senses. Activities include the Scentilicious sniff test, a Digilicious root digging activity, the Artilicious leaf rubbing station, a tasty treasure hunt and more. A Children's Adventure Passport can also be purchased for just \$2 in the gift store for use in the exhibit.

**The exhibit is open Tuesdays – Sundays from 9 am to 4:30 pm and is free with admission to the Conservatory. The public should call (415) 831-2090 or visit [www.conservatoryofflowers.org](http://www.conservatoryofflowers.org) for more information.**

### **Background**

The Conservatory of Flowers is a spectacular living museum of rare and beautiful tropical plants under glass. From Borneo to Bolivia, the 1,750 species of plants at the Conservatory represent unusual flora from more than 50 countries around the world. Immersive displays in five galleries include the lowland tropics, highland tropics, aquatic plants, potted plants and special exhibits. Opened in 1879, the wood and glass greenhouse is the oldest existing conservatory in North America and has attracted millions of visitors to Golden Gate Park since it first opened its doors. It is designated as a city, state and national historic landmark and was one of the 100 most endangered sites of the World Monuments Fund.

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