

Tapescript

Susie: This week's edition of World Farming comes from the island of Reunion, off the south-east coast of Africa, where there are vanilla plantations as far as the eye can see. Vanilla is an exotic spice which is very nearly the most expensive in the world – second only to saffron – and certainly the most popular. [7] We're used to tasting it in sweet dishes, but people are now beginning to use it in savoury ones as well. In fact, there's a restaurant near where I live in London, called Fresh Tastes, where chef Antonio Meltini adds vanilla to almost all the dishes, and quite delicious they are too!

These days vanilla is grown in the Caribbean, East Asia and Africa, but it originated in Mexico, where there is a particular insect which can pollinate the plant. [8] This morning, I visited a vanilla plantation here on Reunion. I heard local people referring to the plants as 'green gold' [9] – which isn't surprising when you think of all the money they represent. Good vanilla is always in great demand and the price at the moment is between ?150 and ?180 a kilo for top quality. In fact there's been a problem with supplying customers recently, as storms have had a detrimental effect on the harvest [10] – all the more unfortunate, now the various diseases which used to decimate the crop have been eradicated.

I'm told that some of the earlier producers had their vanilla growing in the shelter of trees, but on modern plantations the plants are grown under nets [11], which can easily be removed when it's time to harvest the vanilla seed pods, which are the valuable part of the plant. After three or four years of growth the first flowers appear, but they only bloom for a day – they need to be pollinated then, either naturally or artificially. Later on, the pods – they're a kind of shell or case which holds the seeds – are harvested. The pickers often make small holes at one end of the pods, as a means of identifying their farm or plantation. [12] Any pods with black marks on them will probably be rejected at this stage. Healthy-looking pods are dried outside in the sun, then they are boiled for about three minutes [13] – which surprised me rather – but if this isn't done, the pods will open and all the seeds will be lost. So it's a very important part of the process. Then the pods are put in boxes which have blankets wrapped round them to retain the heat [14]. Materials like polystyrene have been experimented with, and found unsatisfactory apparently. Finally, when the pods have dried out enough, they're put into new boxes, to allow their characteristic aroma to develop. I was allowed to open up one of these boxes – they're really just like treasure chests.