

The tree that produces chocolate originated in South America. Today, chocolate is produced in tropical countries around the world, especially in South America and Africa. Although grown in tropical countries, consumption of chocolate- more than a million tons annually- is primarily in western European countries, the United Kingdom, and the U.S., partially because chocolate melts too easily in hotter areas of the world. Some people cannot imagine life without chocolate. For them, the scientific name of the tree, *Theobroma cacao*, meaning "food of the gods," probably seems just right. People have enjoyed chocolate for at least 4,000 years beginning with the Aztecs and other native Americans who made a bitter tasting drink from the seeds. The name "chocolate" is from the Aztec word, *xocolatl*, meaning "bitter water." Chocolate is also used for mole, a tasty, dark sauce for meat that is now a part of Mexican cuisine

Chocolate trees are native to shady tropical rainforests and do not grow well when exposed to wind, sun, or cool conditions. Unlike many trees, *Theobroma cacao* produces its flowers directly out of the woody branches and trunk. Large pods (about one foot in length) are produced from the flowers and mature from green to yellow to reddish purple. The flowers and pods are produced year round in the Tropics. Each pod contains 20-40 seeds. The seeds are removed from the pods and fermented, a process that develops the familiar brown color. The seeds are roasted, ground, and processed into cooking or baking chocolate, which is quite bitter, or mixed with milk, sugar, and other ingredients for candy. *Theobroma cacao* belongs to a tropical family of plants that includes the cola tree which produces seeds used to flavor soda pop. There is a national exhibition about chocolate at the Milwaukee Public Museum until January 1, 2006, but you can see living chocolate trees at the Domes any day of the year, including Valentine's Day.

