

3/20/2005 The Chewing Gum Tree - ARID DOME

People have enjoyed chewing gum since the days of the ancient Greeks. Many plants produce latex or resin, probably as a protective mechanism. People have chosen the ones that have a pleasant flavor or hold added flavors, such as spearmint, to clean their teeth and freshen their breath. The first commercial chewing gum in this country was made from spruce gum in the early 1800s. Modern chewing gum began in the late 1860s when chicle was imported to the U.S. from Central America. The commercial chewing gum product "Chicklets" was named for this source. Chicle comes from the latex of the sapodilla tree (*Manilkara zapota*) that grows in the tropical rain forests of Central America. This tree is found mainly in the Yucatan Peninsula which includes parts of Mexico, Guatemala and Belize.

Most of today's chewing gum is made from synthetic vinyl gum base, but chicle is still harvested from sapodilla trees. When zig-zag slashes are made in the bark of the tree with a machete, the latex drips into the grooves and can be collected in a container. After heating, the latex becomes soft and chewy. The special workers, who climb as high as 50 feet in the chicle trees to make these cuts, are called *chicleros*. It is still possible to buy chicle-based chewing gum.

The sapodilla tree is a bat-pollinated, tropical rainforest tree that cannot withstand cold temperatures. It is a very common tree in the rainforests of the Yucatan Peninsula. This attractive, slow-growing, long-lived evergreen tree can grow to 100 feet. It is strong, wind-resistant, and rich in the white, gummy latex. The tree flowers several times a year and produces an egg-shaped, sweet, edible fruit. Some producers are trying to develop the sapodilla tree as a sustainable crop (for both the fruit and the chicle) that can help support the preservation of rainforests and still provide income for the native people.

You can see a sapodilla or chicle tree in the Tropical Dome. You can also grow your own chicle tree and other tropical plants from seeds that are sold in the Domes Gift Shop. Many tropical trees that grow very large in nature make beautiful, slow-growing smaller plants indoors.



A chiclero at work