

<b>FRONT PAGE</b>
News
Sports
Mariner Action
Police & Fire Logs
Business
Archives
News Tip
More News
<b>HOT LINKS</b>
Election 2005
Graying of Douglas County
Government Links
Road Reports
Photo Galleries
Email Headlines
Click & Vote Poll
Weather
Furry Tail Times
Special Sections
<b>OPINION</b>
Public Forum
Guest Columns
Staff Columns
Editorials
Write the Editor
Blog
<b>SPOTLIGHT</b>

<b>EDUCATION</b>
Education
Graduation
Spelling Bee
<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b>
Entertainment
Events Calendar
Features
Outdoors
Life
Health & Fitness
Food
Senior Times
<b>COMMUNITY</b>
Our Community
Submit: Engagement
Submit: Wedding
Submit: Anniversary
Submit: Announcement
<b>MARKETPLACE</b>
Classifieds
Place an Ad
Real Estate Guide
Discover Douglas County
<b>PUBLIC NOTICES</b>
Birth Announcements
Obituaries
Submit an Obituary
Public Notice
<b>SUBSCRIBERS</b>
Subscribe
NIE Order
Temp/ Vacation Stop
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Privacy Policy

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## Vanilla orchids of Hawaii

Only U.S. farmer growing the flavorful organic crop sees demand rise

**KARIN STANTON**  
For The Associated Press  
February 1, 2005

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PAAUILO, Hawaii -- Jim Reddekopp took the challenge of cracking a virtual world monopoly to become the only commercial grower of vanilla in the United States.

Reddekopp admits he knew little about farming or about vanilla when he started Hawaiian Vanilla Co. seven years ago.

He and his wife Tracy kicked around several other ideas, including saffron, before settling on vanilla, the flavoring essence taken from the seed-pods of vanilla orchids.

"We're risk-takers. We live on faith," he said. "I knew I loved the rural lifestyle and I knew I wanted to raise my children in a rural environment. I knew nothing about growing vanilla."

Vanilla orchids grow only within 25 degrees of the equator, Reddekopp said, which means Hawaii is the only place in the United States where it can flourish.

More than half of the world's crop of vanilla bean is grown in Madagascar, where a devastating cyclone last spring wiped out most of the country's chief export, pushing up the already record prices around the globe.

Other countries that cultivate it include Indonesia, Tahiti, Papua New Guinea, Uganda, India and Mexico, where it originated in the 1500s.

Because vanilla is so expensive to produce, more than 90 percent of what consumers know to be vanilla flavoring or fragrance is synthetic. The only natural source for true, pure vanilla is the pale yellow orchid.

The United States is the world's largest consumer of vanilla, with Europe -- especially France and Germany -- following behind.

The annual demand for pure vanilla is between 2,200 and 3,300 tons and is growing as consumers lean more to organic and natural products.

This year's world crop is expected to be about 2,600 tons, Reddekopp said.

It is, however, a labor-intensive crop. Bees provide the only natural pollination, and each blossom must be pollinated by hand during a one-day blooming period.

"You need human hands to make this work," Reddekopp said.

The pods mature in about nine months, resembling green beans about 7 inches long. They are then blanched in water, which activates the enzymes -- vanillin is the active ingredient -- and creates the flavor, then sun-dried for three months. The beans, now dark brown, are split allowing thousands of tiny, flavorful seeds to spill out.

Much of what Reddekopp now knows he learned from renowned Big Island orchid grower and researcher, Tom Kadooka.

Kadooka, who died Oct. 6 at age 83, began experimenting with the vanilla variety in 1941. By the time he met Reddekopp in 1997, he had much knowledge to pass on to the young man who mirrored his passion and energy.

"He was the first guy I know who shared what he did, which is very, very rare for farmers," said Reddekopp, who established a Kadooka memorial scholarship for agricultural students. "He really did all the research and I did the commercial application."

Reddekopp continues his education, recently attending a science course at Rutgers University. He said he learned vanilla, which is nonperishable, includes 250 compounds that cannot be duplicated in a laboratory. That is one reason vanilla is the most expensive crop behind saffron.



**Drying vanilla beans**  
Jim Reddekopp, owner of Hawaiian Vanilla Company, checks blanched vanilla beans to see if they are dried. The key to drying is to keep the beans pliable. **The Associated Press**

Eight months ago, Reddekopp said, vanilla was selling for a record \$275 to \$300 per pound. By the end of the year, he was getting \$190 per pound.

Prices are expected to rise in the coming months and years as the impact of last month's tsunami on South Asian crops is felt.

The Big Island, which is known as the "Orchid Isle," is the quintessential place for vanilla orchids. More than half of Hawaii's orchids grow there, with sales of flower and nursery products totaling \$50.8 million in 2003, according to the Hawaii Agricultural Statistics Service.

Reddekopp and his family cultivate plants in a 30,000-square-foot greenhouse, turning out just 200 pounds of cured beans each year.

A recent federal grant of \$296,000 from the Agriculture Department's Small Business Innovative Research program will allow Reddekopp to expand his greenhouse facility by 180,000 square feet, as well as his payroll. Currently, the company has three part-time workers.

The grant is intended to create jobs in an area still suffering since the last of the sugar plantations closed nearly a decade ago.

"It's really a Third World product that we are trying to grow in our economy," he said, noting workers in Madagascar are paid \$1 day compared to about \$7 per hour for U.S. farm workers.

Five years ago, Reddekopp bought a 90-year-old former coffee mill, which sits at the 1,900-foot elevation less than a mile from the greenhouse.

The bright yellow building is where he and his family, which includes the couple's five home-schooled children between the ages of 3 and 11, now offer educational talks and luncheons featuring vanilla dishes.

All the recipes were created and cooked by Tracy Reddekopp, who plans to use money from the federal grant to upgrade the kitchen, which will allow her to whip up more adventurous menus. A commercial kitchen also will allow the company to hire several employees and offer lunch to tour groups five days a week.

The company's product line also includes vanilla-scented lotions and bath milks, as well as vanilla beans and bottles of pure extract available in gourmet food stores across Hawaii.

Reddekopp wants Hawaiian vanilla to become a sought-after gourmet commodity. A handful of Hawaii's top chefs, including George Marvothalassitis of Chef Mavro restaurant in Honolulu, already use Reddekopp's beans and extract in their recipes.


"Our goal is to get our vanilla on the best menus in Hawaii," Reddekopp said.

Meanwhile, Reddekopp's company has been highlighted on television programs on the Food Network and Discovery Channel. Next up is a spot on "Epicurious," a Travel Channel program, he said.

"We have a long ways to go, but we have learned a lot," Reddekopp said. "I'm still learning to be a farmer."

On the Net:  
Hawaiian Vanilla Co.: <http://www.hawaiianvanilla.com>

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**Green vanilla beans**  
Jim Reddekopp, owner of Hawaiian Vanilla Company, and his son Isaac, 7, sort out green vanilla pods to be blanched in 150-degree water recently at their Paauilo, Hawaii, farm. **Associated Press photos**



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**Vanilla lotion**  
One of the products that Hawaiian Vanilla Company sells is body lotion with the fragrant smell of vanilla. **The Associated Press**

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