

EDIBLE ORCHIDS:

According to a report released by the Wildlife Conservation Soc. (WCS) some 12 years ago, more than 2.2 million wild orchids are being harvested every year from the “virgin” regions of East Africa, fuelled by a growing demand to use the plants as food. The purpose of this article is to make people aware of the orchid species that are endangered around the world due to human harvesting. To protect them, simply avoid eating dishes containing processed orchids that are harvested from the wild and encourage others to do the same.

In modern times, the name “orchid” derives from the Greek word “Orchis”, which translates to “Testicle” and is based on the fact that many terrestrial orchids have tubers that resemble a pair of testicles.

In the Greek mythology, ORCHIS was the son of a SATYR and a NYNPH. ORCHIS, killed by the BACCHUS supporters for insulting a Bacchus Priestess, turned into a flower that bears his name on the prayers of his father. This and the fact that "Orchis" tubers resemble "Testicles", did lead to the conclusion that the tubers were God’s gift to man to improve his masculinity and were used as an aphrodisiac.

Romans and Greeks used terrestrial orchid tubers to make drinks known under different names such as: “Satyrion”, “Priabiscus”, and “Sahlab”. These drinks were thought to be powerful aphrodisiacs.

In Crete, Greece, Orchid tubes were boiled in water or fried in olive oil. Cretans were probably the first to fry potatoes in oil based on their experience in frying orchid tubers.

The Chinese were using orchids for medicinal purposes for over 3000 years and continue to do so today. Pharmaceutical companies in China produce medicine predominantly from cultivated orchids.

In Thailand, Singapore, Japan, Malaysia, etc., orchid flowers and the canes of soft cane Dendrobiums are consumed daily.

All orchids are considered safe for human consumption, something that is not entirely true as many people are allergic and suffer from stomach-ache.

VANILLA: Vanilla is used for flavouring foods and beverages. Centuries ago, when “vanilla” was brought to Europe from America, it was considered to be an aphrodisiac. The general believe was that it also had therapeutic values and could help with digestion and headaches. There is a lot of information available online about Vanilla. Vanilla is being produced commercially and therefore, it is not an endangered species.

SALEP: Salep or saḥlab or Sahlep. **Flour** traditionally made from pounding and grinding dried orchid tubers. Originally, only tubers of the orchid species *Orchis mascula* and *Orchis molitaris* were used; however, as these orchid species did become rare, the exploitation of other orchid species began. Commercially, the tubers are washed and immersed for a short time in boiling water to destroy the vitality of the tuber and remove the bitterness. The outer skins are rubbed off and the tubers are dried either exposed to the sun or in an oven. The dried tubers are ground to powder before using; Salep powder has a yellowish colour. The powder is used to produce beverages and desserts and is available in many Greek, Middle East

and Iranian markets. As beverage, salep was very popular in Europe, before coffee and tea were introduced. As desserts we know “salep pudding” and “salep ice cream” which is popular in Greece and Turkey. The ice cream production alone uses a substantial number of tubers (1 tuber = ca 5 gm).

KAIMAKI ICE CREAM: Famous Greek Creamy Ice Cream that contains “Masticha” (Gum Mastic) which gives it the chewing texture and Salep powder as a thickening agent. A similar ice cream called “Dondurma” is produced in Turkey.

CHIKANDA: Popular Zambian dish. A brown jelly, also sold at roadsides by the slice. Prepared by pounding the orchid tubers to remove the skins, then grinding to produce the “yellowish flour” which is then mixed with water, soda, salt to test and peanut flour to adjust the thickness. The mix is poured into a suitable container and left to set and cool. The growing appetite for “Chikanda” had a dramatic impact on orchid populations in the whole of East Africa.

CHINAKA: Malawi delicacy. Used like “Relish”. According to locals, Chinaka is not only a delicacy but also a powerful medicine that protects people from diseases and provides them with energy. *Satyrium cursonii* is the preferred species; however, other species like *Disa englerian*, *Disa robusta*, *Disa zombica*, *Habenaria clavate*, *Satyrium ambylosaccos*, *Satyrium buchani*, etc do the job too.

The tubers are cleaned, pounded in a mortar and cooked preferably with a locally produced “baking powder” called “Chidulo”. If Chidulo is not available, sodium bicarbonate can be used in its place. In a few minutes, a “cake” mix is produced which is poured into a container and left to cool and solidify. To finish, the “cake” is cut into small pieces and cooked with groundnut sauce or tomatoes. Chinaka the “relish” is ready.

OLATSHE: Popular Bhutan dish, part of the local diet. The preferred orchid for this dish is *Cymbidium hookerianum*. The flowers (open or not) are removed from the stalk, washed and boiled in water until soft. After draining the water a mixture of spices, melted cheese and salt are added. After five minutes cooking, the dish is ready. Olatshe can be served with rice, noodles or simply used as a dip. The orchid flowers add bitterness and the additional spices are added to offset that bitterness.

OLACHOTO: Another Bhutan delicacy which uses *Cyclanthera pedata* flowers instead of *Cymbidium* flowers.

DENDROBIUM: Dendrobium orchids are a very common food all over the world but especially in Thailand.

Den. bigibbum hybrid-flowers are sold in USA as edible decorations for food.

Dendrobium flowers are also dipped in batter and deep-fried.

Den. chrysotoxum flowers are dried and consumed as tea.

Den. longicornu flowers are pickled by the “Tamang” people (living in Nepal).

Dendrobium canes are stir-fried in many Asian countries and are also used to make sauces. In Singapore and Thailand there are Orchid Cookery Classes, introducing stir-fried orchids and orchid sauces.

Australian aborigines use *Den. kingianum* and *Den. speciosum* as food. Other orchids were also consumed as an emergency “bush food” like *Gastrodia* and *Caladenia* species.

Den. cathenatum canes are boiled and consumed as tea.

In Hawaii, locals use orchids to prepare salad dishes, sugar coated candies, and main dishes orchids cooked with scallops.

OTHER USES:

A tea known as “Bourbon tea”, was used 200 years ago as a sedative. It was made out of an infusion of certain fragrant orchids.

In Malawi, the orchid tubers are used to treat coughing, abdominal pains, heart attack, eye sore, ring worm, rheumatism and kidneys problems.

In Japan, sun dried orchid flowers are made into tea.

In China, Orchid Wine is popular and has been noticed in the International Wine Exhibition in Shanghai. Allegedly looks like dark coffee.

Oils from fragrant orchid flowers are being used in the production of hair shampoos, soaps as well as perfumes.

There are many other uses; however, most orchids used, *Dendrobiums*, *Phalaenopsis*, etc. are commercially produced. The orchids that are in danger of extinction are predominantly Terrestrial orchids and the countries where orchids are being harvested from the wild are predominantly China, Turkey and Tanzania and their neighbouring countries. In China Slippers are used to feed domesticated animals like pigs.

As I understand it, the list of orchid flower importing countries includes all European (especially Germany and England)