



# HAWAI'I ISLAND JOURNAL

**Home Page**

**Last Issue Stories**

**Current Publisher's Column**

**Current Calendar**

**Current Classifieds**

**Archives**

**About The Journal**

**Where To Pick Us Up**

**Advertising Rates**

**Subscriptions**

**Submissions**

**Contact Us**

Taking Care of Business  
... where our readers like to do business

**It's Not Just "Plain Vanilla"**  
Journal readers choose vanilla as Hawai'i Island's most promising new product

by Alan D. McNarie

Journal readers' choice of "vanilla" as the best "new, innovative product or industry" must hold a slight tinge of irony for Tom Kadooka. The 83-year-old Kona orchid grower has been working for more than two decades to establish a viable vanilla industry on this island. Now his years of hard work and careful research are paying off. Other farmers are coming to him for advice on growing vanilla orchids, the only source of natural vanilla. Kadooka's face even appears on a vanilla ice cream carton. Meadow Gold, whose premium "Hawaiian Vanilla Bean Ice Cream" uses only island-grown vanilla, has established a scholarship for agriculture students in Kadooka's name.

Kadooka wasn't the only one to dream of a local vanilla industry, though he quite likely has held that dream the longest. Five years ago, the Redencopp family bought a small field in Kona and, with Kadooka's help, founded the Hawaiian Vanilla Company. Today, the company also has a 5-acre greenhouse in Pa'auilo, and is recruiting other farmers for a vanilla grower's cooperative. In addition to supplying Meadow Gold, the Hawaiian Vanilla Company sells vanilla beans and extract, and is marketing a line of vanilla-scented beauty products. Local restaurants and resorts have begun carrying the company's Island Breeze Hawaiian Vanilla Tea. Soon to come is Meadow Gold Hawaiian Vanilla Milk.

The company's efforts may offer some hope to would-be farmers on the island's Hamakua Coast, which is still recovering from the collapse of the sugar industry.

"We are finishing up phase one of our Small Business Innovation Research Grant [through US Department of Agriculture]," notes Jim Redencopp. "Phase two begins in 2004. We're looking for new farmers interested in growing vanilla in Hawai'i, specifically the Big Island."

When their greenhouses hit full production in 2005, says Redencopp, "We hope to be pulling a couple of tons a year out of the greenhouses."

A two-ton crop doesn't seem like very much in the world of agriculture. And it's a mere drop in the bucket, compared to the annual demand for vanilla.

"If we make even a million pounds, we don't have to worry about exports to foreign countries, because the U.S. would use them all," states Kadooka.

But those two tons will be two tons of the world's second most expensive spice, which currently sells for about \$125 a pound. Hawaiian Vanilla Company's website, [www.hawaiianvanilla.com](http://www.hawaiianvanilla.com), sells vanilla bean pods for \$5 a pod and four-ounce bottles of vanilla extract at \$1.25 an ounce. Only saffron, which is made from the pollen of a special variety of crocus flower, is more pricey. Vanilla orchids actually have a long history on the island. Even before World War II, vanilla was used to flavor okolehao, a moonshine liquor made primarily from fermented ti leaves. When Kadooka began growing orchids in 1941, his eye was caught by a feral plant left over from those days. Intrigued, he started looking for information about the vine, and discovered a page and a half about vanilla in a book about orchids. He's been learning ever since.

What Kadooka discovered was an oddity, even among a family of plants known for its oddities: vanilla is the only orchid grown primarily not for its blossoms, but for seeds. While most common greenhouse orchids form compact clumps or tall stalks, vanilla orchid plants are long, sprangly vines. While orchids in general are famous for their longevity, a vanilla orchid's yellow-green blooms can be pollinated only for a single day. If the grower isn't there to hand-pollinate it on that day, taking the place of some unknown insect from the orchid's Meso-American homeland, the long, brown vanilla bean pod, the source of vanilla, will never form.

Those quirks of nature - a one-day blooming period combined with the need for hand-pollination - are among the factors that help make vanilla so expensive. It's an extremely labor-intensive crop. Kadooka estimates that a quarter-acre of vanilla orchids requires as much labor as an acre of coffee.

But farmers don't necessarily have to choose between vanilla and coffee. The shade-loving orchid vines can be grown under coffee trees, and Kadooka notes that the labor-intensive pollination period for the orchids takes place in February through June, after the peak of the coffee harvest is over.

Vanilla has one other advantage. Properly cured, notes Kadooka, it's practically non-perishable. Beans can last 10-20 years in storage. That could be a big advantage, if a farmer wants to wait for better prices before selling his or her crop.

Still, it isn't an easy crop. Every step in the process of production, from pollination through growth, harvest, drying and product use, requires special knowledge, skill and care. Kadooka notes, for instance, that beans that are harvested too early don't have as high a concentration of vanillin, the active ingredient of vanilla.

According to Hawaiian Vanilla's website, Kadooka has taught the company's producers to first blanch the harvested beans at 150 degrees Fahrenheit before drying, wrap the beans in a towel to keep them warm then dry them under plastic.

"The key to drying is to keep vanilla beans pliable," states the website. "Too dry and they will crack, too soft and the seeds will ooze out." Cracks in the pods would allow fungi and bacteria to enter.

It's taken Kadooka decades of study and experimentation to accumulate that sort of knowledge. He worries that now, when the infant industry is on the brink of success, some entrepreneurs may "jump on the bandwagon" in search of quick money, without exercising that sort of care to maintain the crop's high quality. And if Hawai'i is to succeed with such a labor-intensive crop in a world where nearly everywhere else has cheaper labor, maintaining that high level of quality is vital. With no government standards or grading to maintain quality, it's up to the producers in this new industry to police themselves.

