

Q: Can I grow a chocolate tree?

A: *Theobroma cacao* L is the botanical name for the tree whose fruit we process to make chocolate.

A native of the Central Americas and the Caribbean, this little tree is one of the treasures brought from the new world to the old. Linnaeus named the tree 'Theobroma', which translates to 'Food of the Gods'. The people native to the Caribbean Islands valued the beans so highly that they were used as currency as well as a beverage. Aztec legend has it that the god Quetzalcoatl brought the cocoa tree to earth from Paradise, and showed the people how to roast, crush and grind the seeds to paste. The drink was 'discovered' by the Spanish and the beans brought to Europe. Cacao is derived from the Aztec word cacahuatl, the name given to the pounded seeds by the Mexicans.

A small tree, 4-8m (13-26ft), with glossy, drooping foliage, Theobroma demands high temperatures. The foliage shows damage at 0.5° C (33° F), serious damage at -2° C (28° F). Growing in the shade of larger trees the lateral roots are found close to the surface, but the tap roots can extend to 2m (6 1/2 ft.) in loose soil. That would require a large container! Wind-intolerant, loves ample moisture and excellent drainage, and rich, organic, deep soils. If you want to grow one in the Bay Area, you will need a warm greenhouse with ample humidity. The trees can be propagated by cuttings, but seedling is less expensive. The seeds germinate when they are mature, and must be planted as soon as possible, as they do not remain viable for very long. The seedlings need to be shaded for several years. The flowers and fruit grow directly on the trunk of the tree and the main branches. It takes two years for a tree to flower in the tropics, four to five years before pods are produced. The large yellow, green or red pods contain a sweet tasting pulp and 20-50 beans. It is the beans that are fermented, roasted, and processed to extract cocoa powder. In the tropics midges, aphids, ants and wild bees will pollinate the flowers. In a greenhouse, you will have to try to duplicate their efforts.

Common name: cacao, chocolate tree, cacao, kakao.

Family: sterculiaceae (cacao family).