

Relying on the Rainforest

Chocolate

Cocoa has been eaten and drunk by humans since around 600 to 200 BC, when the first hot chocolate drink was made from mashed cocoa seeds. Now, chocolate is the most popular sweet treat in the world!

According to the World Cocoa Foundation, we consume more than 4.5 million tonnes of cocoa beans every year!

The word 'chocolate' is from the Aztec word 'xocolatl', which means 'bitter water'. Cocoa comes from the beans of the cacao plant.

The cacao tree is an evergreen that grows to about 15 to 25 feet tall.

Palm oil is also used in order to help create a smooth and shiny appearance in some chocolate. It also keeps the chocolate from melting.

Because chocolate is in such high demand, it is important that cacao trees are grown in a way that is safe for the environment.



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Soap

From the antioxidants in açai berries and balsam to the moisturising Brazil nut, the diverse plants in the Amazon rainforest provide humans with the perfect combination of exotic butters, plant extracts and oils for making luxurious soaps.

Many soap products take ingredients from the plants, nuts, flowers, and herbs of tropical rainforests. For example, copaiba oil is an oily resin that is extracted from a tree in the rainforest and is known among indigenous tribes for its soothing and calming properties on the skin.

In some brands of soap, palm oil is also used as it is able to remove dirt from hair and skin and is able to moisturise.



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Shampoo

Oil from the oil palm tree is used as a conditioning agent that helps to restore the natural oils of our hair – oils which can be stripped away or removed by most shampoos.

Oil palms grow best in tropical rainforests but the uncontrolled clearing of these forests for plantations has led to the loss of many species. Oil palm plantations have also been connected to the destruction of habitat of endangered species, including orangutans, tigers, elephants and rhinos.



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Medicines

The Amazon rainforest provides medicines to treat or cure:

- inflammation
 - diabetes
 - muscle tension
 - surgical complications
 - malaria
 - heart conditions
 - skin diseases
 - arthritis
- and much more.

About 7000 substances that doctors prescribe come from plants. 70% of the 3000 plants identified by the United States National Cancer Institute as having anti-cancer properties live in the rainforest.

Some extracts from rainforest plants can be used directly as drugs, while others need to be prepared carefully. Rainforest plants can be responsible for curing many things, from small, nagging headaches to lethal diseases such as malaria.



Nuts

Two very well-known types of nut come from the rainforest: cashews and Brazil nuts.

The Brazil nut tree is one of the tallest in the forest, reaching heights of over 160 feet. Its fruit is the size of a tennis ball and very heavy. In January and February, this fruit ripens and falls all 160 feet to the ground, at speeds of up to 50mph.

Inside the fruit's hard, woody shell are between 10 and 21 nuts arranged in a pattern a little like the inside of an orange. The shell is so hard that only one known animal can open it: the agouti, a large rodent with very sharp teeth.

Brazil nuts are packed with vitamins and minerals, protein and fibre, and their oil is useful in many ways.



Vanilla

Vanilla is the second most expensive spice available to us. The reason for it costing so much is that it takes a lot of time and hard work to grow and process.

Vanilla pods are the fruit of the vanilla orchid: a large plant with smooth, green leaves and long roots which cling to trees. Vanilla vines can grow up to 30m long, climbing to the tops of tall forest trees.

The pods are often called beans and they have very little flavour when they are picked. The flavour develops when the pods are 'cured'.

Vanilla beans are dark brown and have small, black seeds inside. If the pod is chopped up very small, it can be used to add flavour to ice cream, milkshake, candles, puddings, cakes and many other lovely things.



Coffee

After oil, coffee is the most valuable commodity consumed today and it is shipped from every country on earth. People drink coffee in almost every country in the world.

The coffee plant is evergreen and can grow up to 30 feet tall. Coffee flowers are small and white, and have a strong smell.

Coffee berries and their seeds must undergo several processes before they can become the roasted coffee that we are used to seeing. The seeds are taken out of the berries and dried. Next, they are roasted at very hot temperatures. To make coffee drinks, the beans need to be ground up very finely.

In 2016, Brazil was named the leading grower of coffee beans, producing one third of the coffee in the world.

Brazil's type of coffee bean is called 'robusta'.



Fruits and Vegetables

Since 10% of the world's plant species live in the Amazon rainforest, it is natural that many of our fruits and vegetables should come from there. Some foods that come from the rainforest are:

- avocado
- banana
- grapefruit
- lemon
- mango
- orange
- papaya
- passion fruit
- pepper
- pineapple
- potato
- tomato

Today, we don't get a lot of these foods directly from the rainforests because it is possible to grow them outside of the forest. However, due to their tropical climate, areas of rainforests are being destroyed to provide space for plantations as the conditions are perfect for growing.

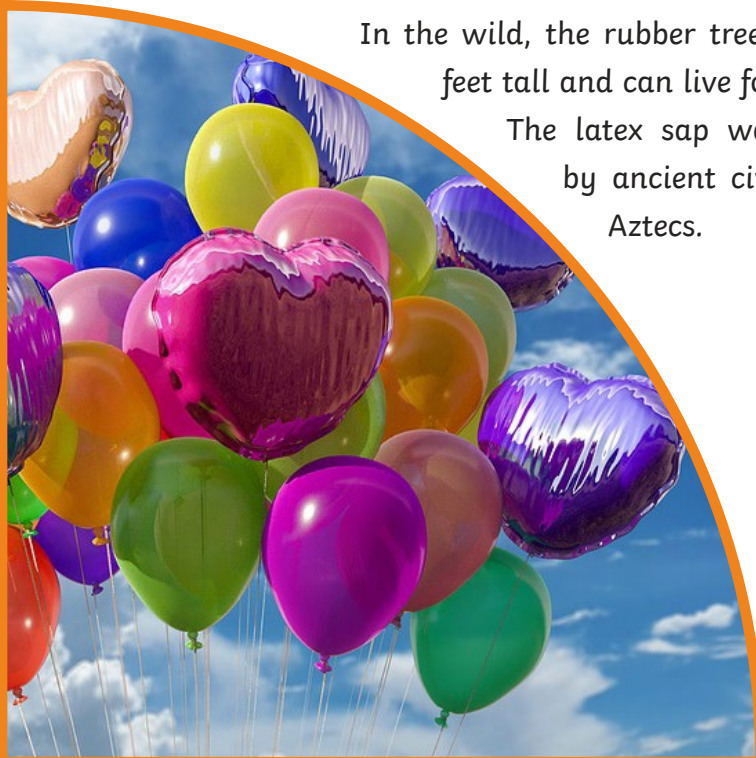


Rubber

Rubber trees come from the Amazon rainforest but they are now also grown in other parts of the world in large plantations. The tree can be 'tapped' and latex seeps out. This is natural rubber and is used for many things, such as:

- tyres
- elastic bands
- rubber gloves
- balloons
- pencil erasers
- wellies

In the wild, the rubber tree can grow to 130 feet tall and can live for up to 100 years. The latex sap was first discovered by ancient civilizations like the Aztecs.



Wood

Tropical forests are home to some of the most beautiful and valuable types of wood in the world. These include:

- teak
- mahogany
- rosewood
- balsa
- sandalwood

and many more.

Much of the wooden furniture used around us, and many of the wooded wall and window frames, are made from rainforest wood. You can even find tropical forest tree fibres in items like rugs, mattresses, ropes, strings and fabrics.

Recently, the world has been made aware of the dangers caused by the timber industry. Logging has the ability to care for or destroy an ecosystem. Environmentally responsible logging is being supported all over the world.

