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## **This year as Valentines Day approaches consider, for just one moment, where that scrumptious chocolate came from**

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By Dr Reese Halter

Guest columnist

This year as Valentines Day approaches consider, for just one moment, where that scrumptious chocolate came from.

Chocolate comes from the tropical cacao tree's cantaloupe-sized bean pods. More specifically, it's the seeds inside the pod.

There are three species with over 90 per cent of the pods coming from Forastero cacao. The most valuable chocolate with a fruity, spicy flavor comes from the Criollo cacao.

Cacao trees grow in the understory, and seedlings need shade.

Tiny flowers, growing on tree trunks and lower branches, depend upon midges and other insects, which feed on the flower's nectar, to cross-pollinate the trees.

Inside each large pod is sweet pulp and between 25 and 50 seeds. It takes about five months for the pods to ripen.

In an attempt to increase yield, some plantations remove the native overstory. Without the protection of plants and animals in the rainforest, the trees become susceptible to disease, must be sprayed with toxic pesticides and the soil treated with petro-chemical

fertilizers.

West Africa produces about 40 percent of the world's cocoa and at least \$118 million per year of their gross \$1.4 billion in sales goes towards fueling conflicts and buying firearms. Worse still, according to the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, an estimated 284,000 children are enslaved in hazardous conditions along the Ivory Coast and other African countries, where they work on cacao plantations, applying pesticides and using machetes.

In America we consume over \$14 billion worth of chocolate products including drinks, candy and cosmetics.

In fact, America consumes about 11 pounds per person per year, most of it between meals. The Swiss hold the world record at 22 pounds per person per year.

There are many reasons not to boycott chocolate.

Chocolate contains antioxidants and also high levels of chemicals known as phenolic compounds, which may help combat coronary disease. Phenolics are known to prevent fat-like substances in the blood stream from oxidizing and clogging the arteries.

We should support Fair Trade Certified cocoa, chocolate bars and chocolate chips sold in over 2,000 retail locations across America including Safeway, Whole Foods, Target and Wal-Mart.

Hershey's ([www.hersheys.com](http://www.hersheys.com)) and M&M/Mars ([www.mmmars.com](http://www.mmmars.com)) control two-thirds of the \$14 billion American chocolate market and they must scrutinize the cacao plantations -- like Starbucks has done in coffee plantations -- and protect children's rights.

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