

## Stop 142 Kid's Tour – Chocolate, Palm House

You probably wouldn't want to eat a 2,000-year old chocolate bar, but that's how long chocolate has been around! The ancient Mayans of what is now Central America, didn't have sugar to make their chocolate sweet - so they flavored theirs with chili peppers! Today, people all over the world eat tons of chocolate every year. And although you know what the final product looks like in the store, you might be surprised to see how chocolate starts out. It comes from a cacao tree! It's native to Central and South America and likes to grow in the shade of taller plants in the rainforest. The Aztec Indians of Mexico called chocolate "the food of the Gods." They loved it so much they used cacao beans for money and sipped their chocolate drinks out of golden cups.

So where is the chocolate? Well, first the tree produces a flower. But the flowers don't grow up near the leaves; they grow all along the branches and trunk of the tree! Each flower produces a pod that can grow as big as a Nerf football! The dark green pod hangs from the tree for almost four months until it gets ripe and turns a creamy orange. When the pods are harvested, they're broken open and the 25 – 30 cacao seeds inside are removed. But at this stage there still is no chocolate flavor - the seeds have to be fermented and roasted. The cacao seeds are naturally bitter, but when they're ground up and mixed with sugar and other flavorings – the result is mmmm, mmmm chocolate!