

## Understanding Weather, Securing the Future

Observed annually on March 23, World Meteorological Day marks the establishment of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) in 1950. The day highlights the critical role of meteorology in safeguarding lives, supporting agriculture, strengthening disaster preparedness, and guiding climate action. Accurate weather forecasts and climate data help governments and communities respond to extreme events such as cyclones, heatwaves and floods. Each year, a specific theme focuses on pressing global climate concerns, encouraging innovation and international cooperation. The observance recognises meteorologists and climate scientists, whose work remains vital, in building resilient societies amid growing environmental challenges.



## #THE TINY

# New Bizarre

New Species Spotlight: Nature's Latest Additions of 2025



Every year, researchers unveil new life forms that expand our understanding of biodiversity. Here's a glimpse into newly described species that have been confirmed through scientific sources in 2025.

### 1. "Bone Collector" Caterpillar (Hawaii)

**Discovery:** A bizarre and carnivorous caterpillar, known as the bone collector, was discovered in the Waianae mountain range of O'ahu, Hawaii. It lives among spider webs, feeds on trapped insects, and camouflages itself by attaching insect body parts, such as ant heads and fly wings, to its silk case.

**Significance:** This is the only known caterpillar that decorates itself with prey remains, turning its environment into a protective disguise. Its evolutionary lineage dates back at least six million years, older than the Hawaiian Islands themselves.

### 2. Xishui Leaf-Litter Toad (Leptobranchella xishuiensis)

**Discovery:** A new leaf-litter dwelling toad species, *Leptobranchella xishuiensis*, has been described from bamboo forests in Xishui County, Guizhou Province, China.



A bronze memorial and statue designed by Réunion artist Jack Beng-Thi in Sainte-Suzanne honors Edmond Albius, who discovered how to pollinate vanilla flowers by hand.

### ● Bulbul Joshi

To get a sense of what Bellevue might have looked like, one should spend an afternoon visiting Villele, one of the island's best-preserved historic plantations, which operates as a museum and memorial to slavery. The main plantation house, completed in 1788, was home to the Panon Desbassays and Villele families. The house sits perched on a hill above the sea, with cream trim, blue shutters and a manicured garden. "It's a place of memory, where 470 slaves died, not from gunshots but exhaustion," says the guide, Patrick Coukan, himself descended from enslaved workers on Réunion. On a wall in the entryway hangs an enormous framed Desbassays family tree extending across the centuries, tracing lines in Réunion and France. "The work of a slave was from three in the morning until nine at night," Coukan tells. "The only vacation was when they slept."

Further inside, among antique furniture, Chinese porcelain and Baccarat crystal candelabras, iron shackles and framed plans for a transport ship, the Le Brookes, are displayed. "The biggest cemetery of Blacks, of slaves. The ocean, the sea of the world." The tour continues, leading around a corner. Above the Desbassays' dining room table hangs a portrait of Edmond as an adult, posing in a white dinner jacket and bow tie, a vanilla vine in one hand. "The image, completed in 1883, is a reproduction of a lithograph by a local artist, Antoine Roussin. The inventor of the pollination of the vanilla flower," Coukan says, pausing in front of the portrait. "Plenty filled their pockets from his invention."

Though published reports claimed that Bellier-Beaumont rewarded Edmond for his discovery by granting his freedom, Jennings insists that never happened. Instead, he told me, Edmond remained in his master's charge

### 4. European Orchard Bee Expansion

**Observation:** The European orchard bee (*Osmia cornuta*) has established populations in southern England, particularly London's Greenwich, representing an expansion northward, likely facilitated by warmer, drier springs due to climate change.

**Ecological Impact:** This solitary bee is an excellent pollinator, especially for fruit trees, and thrives in urban environments using bee houses and cavities.



More than 5,800 miles away, in Paris, an exotic spice shop offers vanilla products—including Côme's—from all over the world tucked inside its Vanilla Cellar, the Cave à Vanilles.

# "He Invented And They Made The Money"

PART:2

Edmond, emancipated at 19, took a last name for the first time, becoming Edmond Albius. (Albus is Latin for white, like the vanilla orchid.) He had hoped to secure a job as a cook on a ship bound for France, but instead, he went to work in the home of a navy captain, earning 15 Francs per month and ten pints of rice per week, according to archival documents. One day in 1851, items were taken from his employer's home. On August 19, Edmond was arrested. According to official records from the time, Edmond confessed to stealing 'a pair of silver bracelets out of a Chinese casket, a small wallet and a silver chain.' The public records don't include other incriminating evidence, making it impossible to know definitively whether Edmond was guilty. He was sentenced to five years of hard labour and forced to pay the costs of his trial.

## #ALL THAT'S GOOD



Farmer Louis Leichnig inspects vanilla beans on his farm in the commune of Saint-Philippe, where most of his plants grow clinging to the tall trunks of red palm trees.



Côme collects vanilla beans at La Vanilleraie, his farm in Sainte-Suzanne, where he sells vanilla vinegar, rum jam, syrup and other vanilla-infused goods.



Leichnig inspects green vanilla beans, which grow deep in the forest on lands his family has farmed since the 1700s. Today, he specializes in "frosting" vanilla and other ultra-premium varieties.

Bellier-Beaumont pleaded for leniency, bargaining the legal authorities with letters defending Edmond's character. The frayed, yellowing letters are now contained in the Departmental Archives in Saint-Denis. "Edmond certainly has indisputable rights to public gratitude and government clemency," he wrote in one letter, sent to the prosecutor general in 1855. "The country is indebted to him for a new branch of industry."

Though Bellier-Beaumont succeeded in getting Edmond released that year after three years in prison, Edmond never benefited from the fortunes his innovation produced. He moved back to Sainte-Suzanne, working odd jobs in agriculture and as a stonemason and a cook. He never returned to vanilla production. In 1871, he married, but he was widowed five years later. He died alone in 1880 at the age of 51. "The very man who, at great profit to this colony, discovered how to pollinate vanilla flowers, has died in the public hospital at Sainte-Suzanne," read his perfunctory obituary in the local Réunion newspaper: "It was a destitute and miserable end."

Reunion today is home to about 150 vanilla growers, a dramatic drop since the 1930s when several thousand blanketed the island. Each operates outside the global market, unable to keep pace with Madagascar and other fruitful vanilla-producing regions. Instead, Réunion growers almost exclusively serve a local and tourist clientele, marketing their pods as luxury goods.

Bertrand Côme is one such producer and an outspoken champion of Réunion vanilla. A native of the mountainous Vosges region of France, Côme came to Réunion as an agronomy student in 1987, completing a thesis on vanilla blights, and never left. "I fell in love with vanilla," he said. "I fell in love with Réunion."

The vanilla industry was already in crisis when he arrived. After Réunion's cooperative of vanilla growers, for which he initially worked, failed in 1995, he helped create its replacement, Provanille, becoming its director. Today, Provanille operates as a sort of central processing facility, transforming green vanilla from local farmers into cured black beans. In 2009, Côme opened his own picturesque vanilla business, La Vanilleraie, a tourist attraction on a historic estate, Le Grand Hazier, dating back to the 1670s, and still active as a sugar plantation.

Old quarters that housed enslaved workers, now used as offices for a local agricultural organization, line the edge of the property. In front of the old plantation house, newly restored but not yet open to visitors, Côme planted vanilla vines on neat rows of trees facing the sea. Where ruined stables, also restored, had been, he built a gift shop, selling vanilla beans, vanilla-infused jams and

runs, and house-made vanilla ice cream for consuming on the property. (Given the price and potency of vanilla beans, no Réunion producer offers tastings of pure vanilla on-site.)

Apart from one small yearly shipment to a boutique spice business in France, Côme sells all of his vanilla, around 300,000 dried beans annually, here in his shop. In 2024, he received 45,000 visitors, plenty enough to sell out, particularly in a challenging growing year when heavy rains and unusually high temperatures brought crop yields way down. "I had to close for a month because I didn't have enough vanilla," he said.

Côme processes his own vanilla along with beans from some 25 other small growers across the island. When the fresh green beans come into his curing facility, open to visitors next door to the gift shop, Côme plunges them into 145-degree water for three minutes, to kill them, the échaudage, or scalding, part of the process, then wraps them in towels to steam for a day. From there, they're laid outside in wood racks to dry in the sun for two weeks, then transferred to wire racks inside, where they continue to dry out for a couple more months. Finally, they're sealed up in teak trunks for another year or so to finish developing the aroma," Côme explained. Every batch is regularly checked and sorted to ensure no mold has developed. "Vanilla is not a lazy job."

Unusually, Côme marks the particular provenance of his vanilla beans, the location on the island where each batch was grown, which he sells at a premium in his shop, at 20 for a tube of three beans. Just as winemakers talk of 'terroir,' how the soil and location of the grapevines affect a wine's flavour, Côme is convinced that vanilla has similar nuances. The notion is novel, and

controversial. Côme told me, "When I was at Provanille, all the growers were against it. They said, 'If I have bad terroir, my vanilla isn't going to sell as well. I'll have to charge less.'"

Côme hopes to back up his theories with science. He's enlisted a graduate student from the Sorbonne in Paris to analyze the aromatic molecules in vanilla grown in different French territories, in Réunion, New Caledonia, Tahiti and Guadeloupe in the Caribbean. His research is just beginning. "The aroma of vanilla has 180 different molecules," Côme said. "The most important being vanillin, but there are plenty of others. It's this diversity that accounts for its particular taste." Côme is not alone among Réunion's producers in striving to find and sell vanilla's distinctive, if as yet, unrecognized qualities. Louis Leichnig is a veteran vanilla grower whose family has been on the island since the 18th century.

Leichnig looks like a character out of a Rudyard Kipling story, with

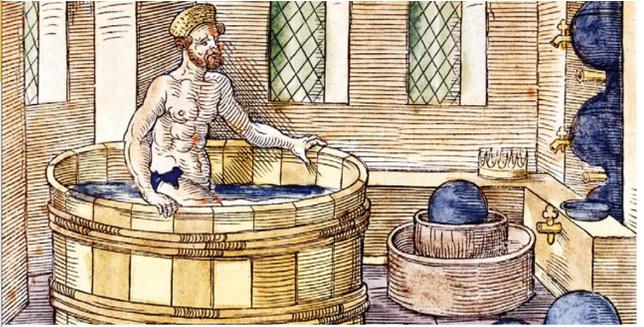


The mansion at Villele was once home to a sugar cane plantation. Today, it serves as a museum and memorial documenting the island's colonial past.

## #BATHING

# Did People in Medieval Times Really Bathe Only Once a Year?

Medieval Hygiene and Weddings: Bathing Once a Year, June Brides, and the Origins of Bridal Bouquets



When we think of medieval Europe, images of castles, knights, and epic battles come to mind, but life in the Middle Ages was also marked by unusual (and sometimes unpleasant) hygiene practices that still echo in our modern traditions.

You may have heard the claim that people bathed only once a year, that June was the most popular month for weddings, and that brides carried bouquets to mask body odour. But how much of this is truth, and how much is myth? Let's take a closer look.

### Did People in Medieval Times Really Bathe Only Once a Year?

Partially true, but often exaggerated. While it's a common belief that medieval people only bathed once a year, the reality is more nuanced. Bathing practices varied by time period, region, and social class.

**● In early medieval Europe (500-1000 CE),** frequent bathing declined with the fall of the Roman Empire, which had promoted public baths and hygiene.

**● By the High and Late Middle Ages (1000-1500 CE),** public bathhouses were found in many towns, and people bathed more often than commonly believed.

However, during colder months and especially in rural areas, bathing was less frequent, once or twice a year may have been the norm for the poor.

Soap existed, made from animal fat and lye, but was harsh and expensive. Wealthier individuals bathed more regularly, often in wooden tubs filled with heated water and scented herbs.

So, while some medieval people might have gone months without a proper bath, the 'once-a-year' idea is an oversimplification.

### Why Were Weddings Popular in June?

Now, this one has some historical basis. June weddings were indeed popular in medieval Europe, and there are a few reasons why!

**1. Practicality:** After winter and early spring, June offered better weather, more available food, and easier travel for guests.

**2. Fertility and Pagan Roots:** The month of June was associated with Juno, the Roman goddess of marriage and childbirth, making it a lucky time to wed.

**3. Bathing Timing (Here's where the myth comes in):** It's often claimed that people took their annual bath in May, so by June, they were still 'fresh' enough for a wedding.



While amusing, there's little hard evidence that bathing schedules were this fixed. It's more likely that the combination of climate, tradition, and agricultural cycles made June an ideal month for marriage.

### The Real Reason Brides Carried Bouquets

The idea that brides carried bouquets to mask body odour has become a popular tidbit in wedding trivia, but it's only partly true.

In medieval and Renaissance times, people did use fragrant herbs and flowers like lavender, rosemary, and garlic to ward off evil spirits, disease (especially the plague), and bad smells. So, bridal bouquets likely served symbolic and practical purposes.

**● Spiritual protection:** Herbs were thought to purify and protect.

**● Fragrance:** They may have helped with body odour, especially in hot weather or during long ceremonies.

**● Fertility and beauty:** Flowers symbolized new life and natural beauty.

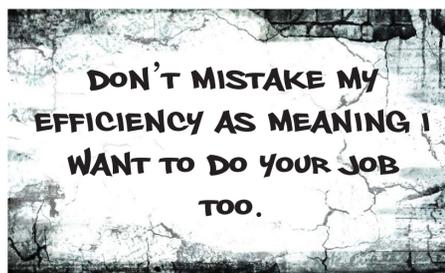
Over time, the practical elements faded, and the bouquet became more decorative and symbolic, evolving into the elaborate floral arrangements that we see today.

### Tradition, Myth, and a Bit of Both

So, did medieval people bathe once a year? Some did, but others bathed more often than we give them credit for. Did people get married in June because they were cleaner? Not exactly, but the timing made practical and spiritual sense. And did brides carry flowers to hide bad smells? Maybe a little, but also to invite blessings and ward off misfortune.

In short, like many traditions, the truth is a mix of practicality, superstition, and evolving custom. And while much has changed since the Middle Ages, these fascinating stories remind us how deeply the past continues to shape our present, even in ways we don't always realize.

## THE WALL



## BABY BLUES



## ZITS



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman