

Edmond Albius's story

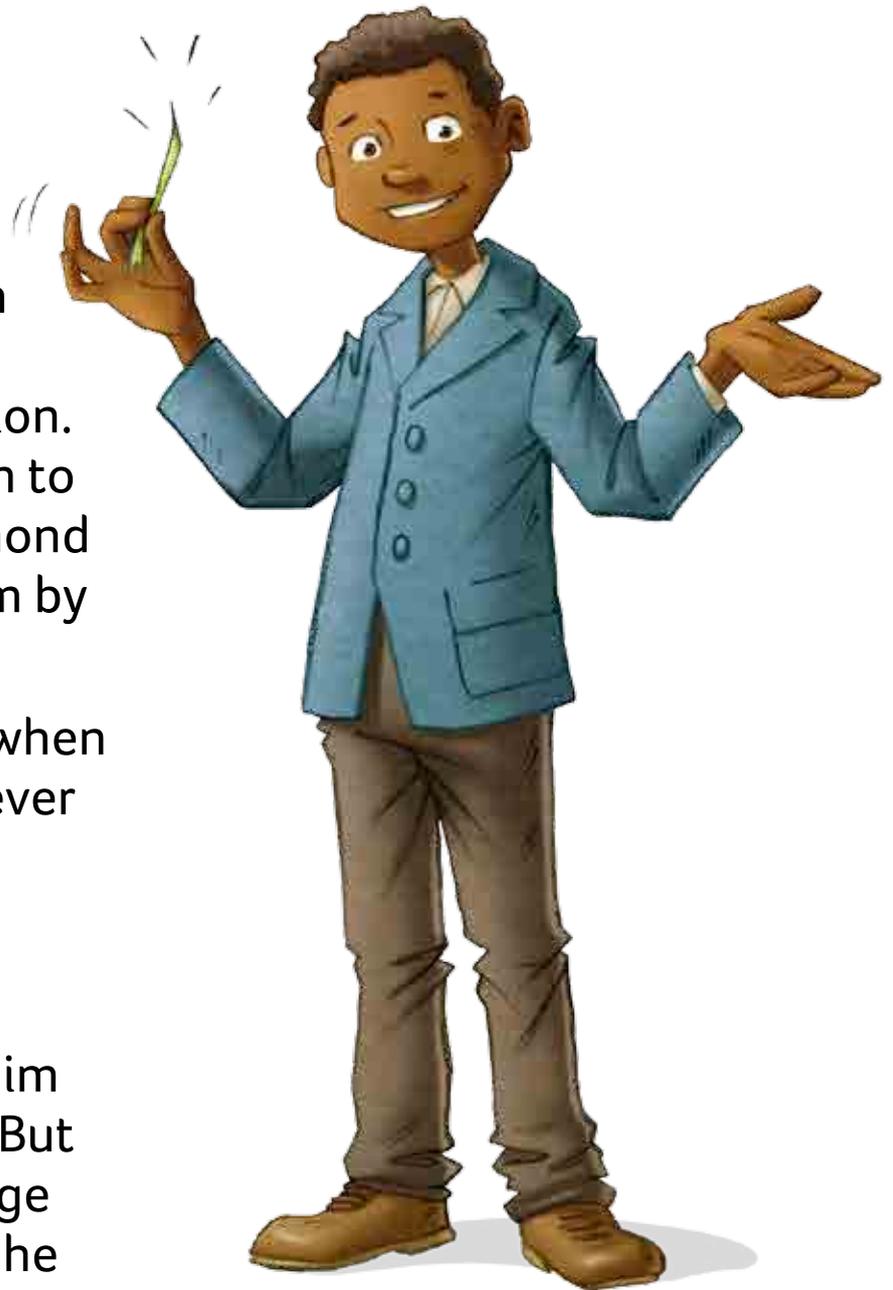
Edmond Albius was born into slavery in 1829 on the French island of Réunion. Albius was the name given to him by his family and Edmond was the name given to him by his slave masters.

Sadly, Albius's mum died when Albius was born and he never knew his dad.

Albius's slave master felt responsible for the little orphan and looked after him when he was very young. But when Albius reached an age where he could be useful, he was given to a well-known plantation owner called Ferréol Bellier-Beaumont.

Mr Bellier-Beaumont had spent a lot of time experimenting with the plants on his estate. He knew that he could make lots of money from growing vanilla orchids but, try as he might, he could never get them to grow fruit.

The young Albius spent his early days following Mr Bellier-Beaumont around and helping where he could. They got on very well. Albius was bright and keen, and Mr Bellier-Beaumont liked to have him as a companion.



Edmond Albius discovered how to hand pollinate vanilla plants with a blade of grass when he was just 12-years-old.

When one day, on one of his walks, Mr Bellier-Beaumont found a vanilla plant forming fruit, he was shocked. He questioned his staff and discovered that Albius had hand pollinated the plant by picking a blade of grass and putting it into the orchid flower until it reached the pollen and then flicking his finger and thumb.

He asked Albius to repeat the experiment with other vanilla plants, which he did easily. They too grew fruit. Soon word got out of Albius's clever pollination method, and Mr Bellier-Beaumont arranged for Albius to hold workshops to show other plantation owners how it was done.

Many people did not want to believe that a mere slave boy could have discovered something that had outwitted so many men of science, and a French botanist called Jean Michel Claude Richard claimed that he had taught Albius the technique when the boy was just eight. Mr Bellier-Beaumont, however, defended Albius and proved it had been all his own work.

In 1848 when Albius was 19-years-old, slavery was abolished in all of the French colonies. Albius became a free man. Like many slaves, he no longer wanted to be called by his slave name.

He had never worked in the fields like many of the other slaves, so he got a job as a kitchen porter. Life was hard for him and he was arrested for theft and sentenced to 10 years' hard labour.

When his former owner Ferréol Bellier-Beaumont heard of his imprisonment, he wrote to the Governor and asked for clemency. He suggested that, if Albius had been given a reward for his hard work, he would not have resorted to stealing. Albius was released after five years but he never really received the recognition he deserved.

Edmond Albius had made many plantation owners rich but he never received any reward for his discovery. In 1980 a small monument to Albius was erected at the bus stop near the Belle Vue plantation where he first fertilized the vanilla vine.