

## **GROW Ecological Commission**

### **A Sustainably Sweet Valentine's Day**

Alexandra Silva, GROW Commissioner, M.S. Ecology & Evolution

Dark chocolate bonbons. White chocolate truffles. Milk chocolate squares with a gooey caramel filling. Whether layered into a s'more, unwrapped from a tinfoil hug, or popped out of a heart-shaped box, chocolate is one of life's joys to many of us.

Each February alone, an estimated 58 million pounds of chocolate are purchased by Americans, though Valentine's Day is just one of many reasons to indulge throughout the year. (Mark your calendar: July 7 is World Chocolate Day). While Americans can't claim to consume the most chocolate per capita - that title is usually claimed by the Swedes - we are a driving force in the global chocolate industry.

Many of the chocolates we do adore - think Lindor truffles, Ferrero Rocher, and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups - contain a special ingredient beyond cocoa: Palm Oil. Within chocolates, palm oil, or its derivations, can improve texture, reduce chances of melting in warmer climates, and increase shelf-life, meaning less goes to waste. It is such a versatile and useful ingredient, in fact, that an estimated 50% of packaged goods found in grocery stores contain it, from Oreos to lipstick. Though it's known by a variety of names - palmityl alcohol, sodium lauryl sulfate, or calcium stearate just to name a few - all palm oil is extracted from the fruit of the African oil palm tree.

As a crop, palm oil is more efficient than other vegetable oils, meaning higher quantities can be produced from smaller areas of land. This efficiency makes it a more environmentally-friendly ingredient than other oils, so long as it is grown sustainably. Unfortunately, much of it is produced using slash-and-burn agriculture, in which virgin rainforest is cut and burned to make way for palm oil plantations. The result has been large-scale deforestation in Southeast Asia, imperiling resident orangutans, rhinos, and tigers, with similar impacts sprouting across Africa and South America as more and more land is converted to plantations.

So how can we help ensure a Sustainably Sweet Valentine's Day?

- Consider using the Valentine's Day Shopping Guide featured here to select chocolates produced by companies committed to sustainable palm oil production.
- Wondering about a sweet treat that isn't listed on the guide? Use the PalmOil Scan mobile app "to scan your favorite products and learn if the companies who make them are members of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil and committed to sustainable palm oil." (And you can scan more than just chocolate!)

- Look for the RSPO certified logo while shopping (though not all certified products currently include the logo on their packaging).

Your purchases can help drive change, prompting companies to use only certified sustainable palm oil. With awareness and small changes to our purchasing habits, we can have an orangutan-friendly, sustainably sweet, Valentine's Day.



Caption: Download the PalmOil Scan app to learn if the company is committed to sourcing sustainable palm oil.



# VALENTINE'S DAY 2026 Orangutan-Friendly Guide

Passionate about animal conservation? Use this guide for your valentine shopping! These products are produced by companies that are members of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and are committed to making a difference for wild orangutans and other endangered species by using certified sustainable palm oil.



Want to find even more products? Use PalmOil Scan, an app developed under the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) and regionally managed by Cheyenne Mountain Zoo. To download, visit [cmzoo.org/palmoil](http://cmzoo.org/palmoil) or search "palm oil" in your app store and look for the green orangutan logo.

Caption: Valentine's Day Shopping Guide



Caption: Look for the RSPO logo on products with sustainable palm oil.

## Recipe of the Month:

### Italian Green Minestrone

A bit of comfort in the winter months and easy on the budget. For a vegan option simply omit the parmesan rind from the broth and the grated cheese from the pesto sauce.

### Ingredients

1 onion - diced (small)  
4 cloves garlic -sliced  
1 carrot -diced  
1 stick celery -diced  
2 cups green cabbage -shredded  
1 sprig rosemary  
8 sprigs thyme  
3 tbsp olive oil  
1.5 qt low sodium vegetable stock + more as needed  
1.5 cups golden potatoes -diced into 1/2 inch cubes  
1.5 tsp sea salt + more to taste  
15 oz canned borlotti or cannellini beans - drained and rinsed well  
1 cup baby arugula or spinach  
1 tsp black peppercorns  
4 inches Parmesan rind (optional)

### *Pesto*

1 bunch fresh basil (leaves only)  
1/4 cup toasted pine nuts, walnuts or hazelnuts  
1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil  
1 lemon -juiced  
1/4 cup parmesan cheese -grated  
2 cloves garlic  
1 pinch sea salt - to taste

### Instructions

- Heat up a soup pot on medium flame with a lug of olive oil.
- Add the onion, celery and carrot and sauté together with a pinch of salt for about 10 minutes.
- Add the garlic, rosemary, thyme and peppercorns and toss to coat.
- Stir in the cabbage and cook another 5 to 10 minutes until wilted.
- Add the diced potatoes, Parmesan rind and vegetable stock and bring to a simmer. Cook together until the potatoes are cooked through, another 10 minutes.
- Stir in the cooked beans and spinach/arugula and adjust seasonings to taste with more sea salt. While the minestrone is cooking make the pesto.

### *Pesto*

- Add the basil, olive oil, garlic, nuts and half of the lemon juice to a food processor and puree until smooth. Adjust seasonings to taste with sea salt and more lemon juice.
- Ladle the minestrone into bowls and serve with spoonfuls of the pesto on top.

Source: <http://ciaoflorentina.com/>

Have a plant-based recipe you'd like to share with the community? Send it to [GROW@westchester-il.gov](mailto:GROW@westchester-il.gov) for consideration for future newsletters.

**Green Fact of the Month:**

Palm oil grown without sustainability standards is a leading cause of tropical deforestation worldwide. **Choose products made with sustainably sourced palm oil whenever possible.**

Source: **United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization — [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)**