

# Pruning for cacao production: the six steps

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Marilyn Villalobos Rodriguez

COLLECTION  
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The Central American Cacao Project (PCC) at CATIE (Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center) aims to increase the productivity, diversity and financial and environmental value of the cacao plantations of at least 6,000 Central American families.

Working closely with cacao farming families, the Project creates alliances with other partners in the region in order to enhance the social interactions, competitiveness and business capacity of the producers' organizations and improve the living conditions of their members.

The Project promotes efforts to increase the knowledge and skills of farming families and students at agricultural schools, technical colleges and agronomy faculties, for the sustainable production of cacao.

The Project also offers equal opportunities as well as economic, social and cultural responsibilities for men and women of all ages and from different ethnic groups in all its spheres of action.

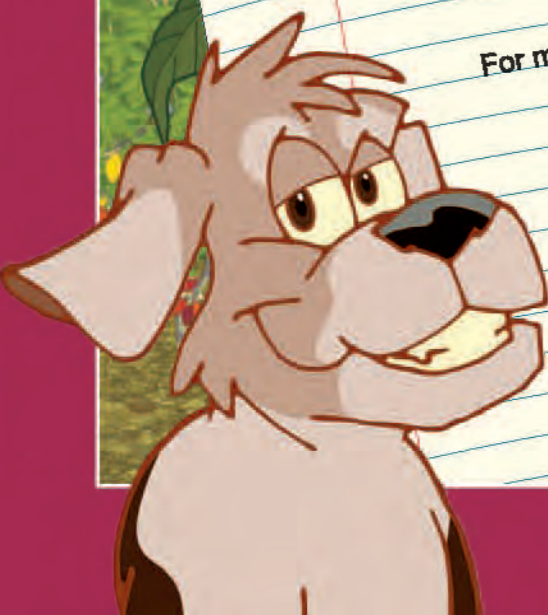
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The Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center (CATIE) is a regional center dedicated to research and graduate education in agriculture and the management, conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. CATIE's members include: the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), Belize, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Venezuela and Spain.

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Several friends and neighbors who produce cacao have decided to meet regularly to share what they know and to work in their cacao farms. Today the families have met to work on the farm that belongs to Eliseo and Flory, and they will do the same on the farms of others in the group. Filadelio will be the local facilitator since he has received technical training in sustainable management of cacao. Today the families will learn how to prune their cacao farms and will apply the method on Eliseo and Flory's farm.



Welcome, everybody. It's great to have you here.

Yes, we're excited to see whether you can help us get better production on our cacao farm.

If we manage the farm well, Eliseo, controlling shade, planting good varieties, pruning often,

keeping the soil fertile and controlling diseases, I guarantee you that before long we will see cocoa production go up.





Come over here, Marinita. Stay with us.



I hope you will keep bringing your kiddos to these meetings—they learn so quickly.




Our cacao farm covers 2 hectares, and I know it needs a good pruning.



Pruning is so important to our producing better.

Actually our cacao farm produces very little, barely 150 kilos of dry cacao per hectare each year, equivalent to about 230 pounds per manzana.






We should produce between 400 and 500 kilos per hectare per year.

In other words, hmmm...let me figure this out. Aha! We should produce between 600 and 750 pounds per manzana. If you want it in quintals, remembering that a quintal is 100 pounds,


we should produce between 6 and 7 1/2 quintals per manzana. A manzana is smaller than a hectare, covering only 7,000 square meters.

Did you hear that, Eliseo! We could produce between 6 and 7 1/2 quintals per manzana per year.



By pruning the cacao at least once a year, we stimulate flowering and keep the tree short and give it a proper shape.

Yes, Filadelfo, and that brings up another point: it's easier to harvest the mature pods and eliminate diseased pods in a short tree than in a tall one.



You're right, Cecilia. But before we start talking about pruning cacao, let's first go over the parts of a plant.



## Parts of a cacao tree



Let me show you the parts of a cacao tree.

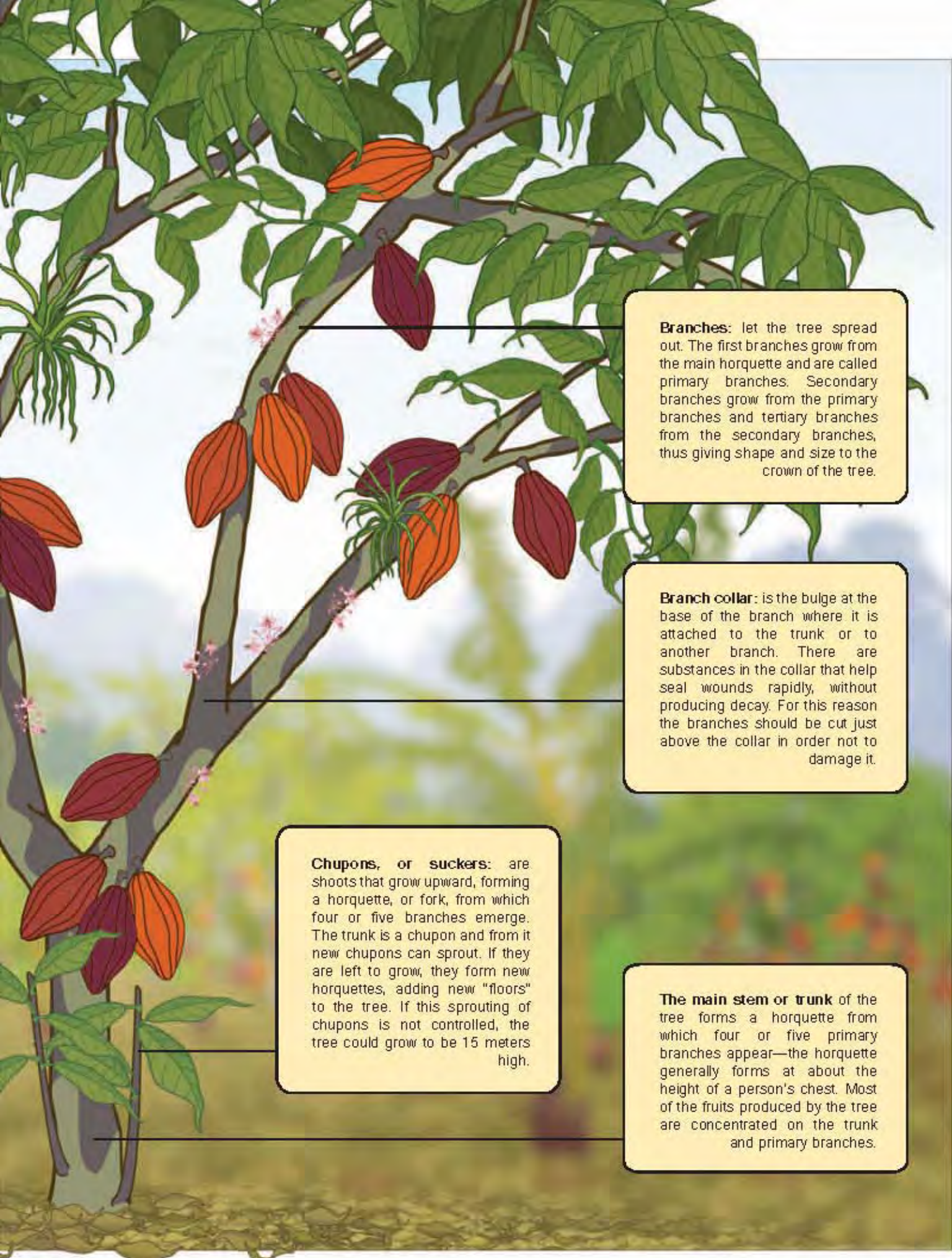
**Leaves:** are necessary for producing food for the tree. They transform sunlight and the water and nutrients absorbed from the soil into energy that the tree uses to grow and produce fruits.

**Petiole:** is the little stem that joins the leaf to the branch.

**Pod:** This is the fruit of the cacao.

**Flower cushions:** are bulges on the trunk and branches from which the flowers and, later on, the pods emerge.





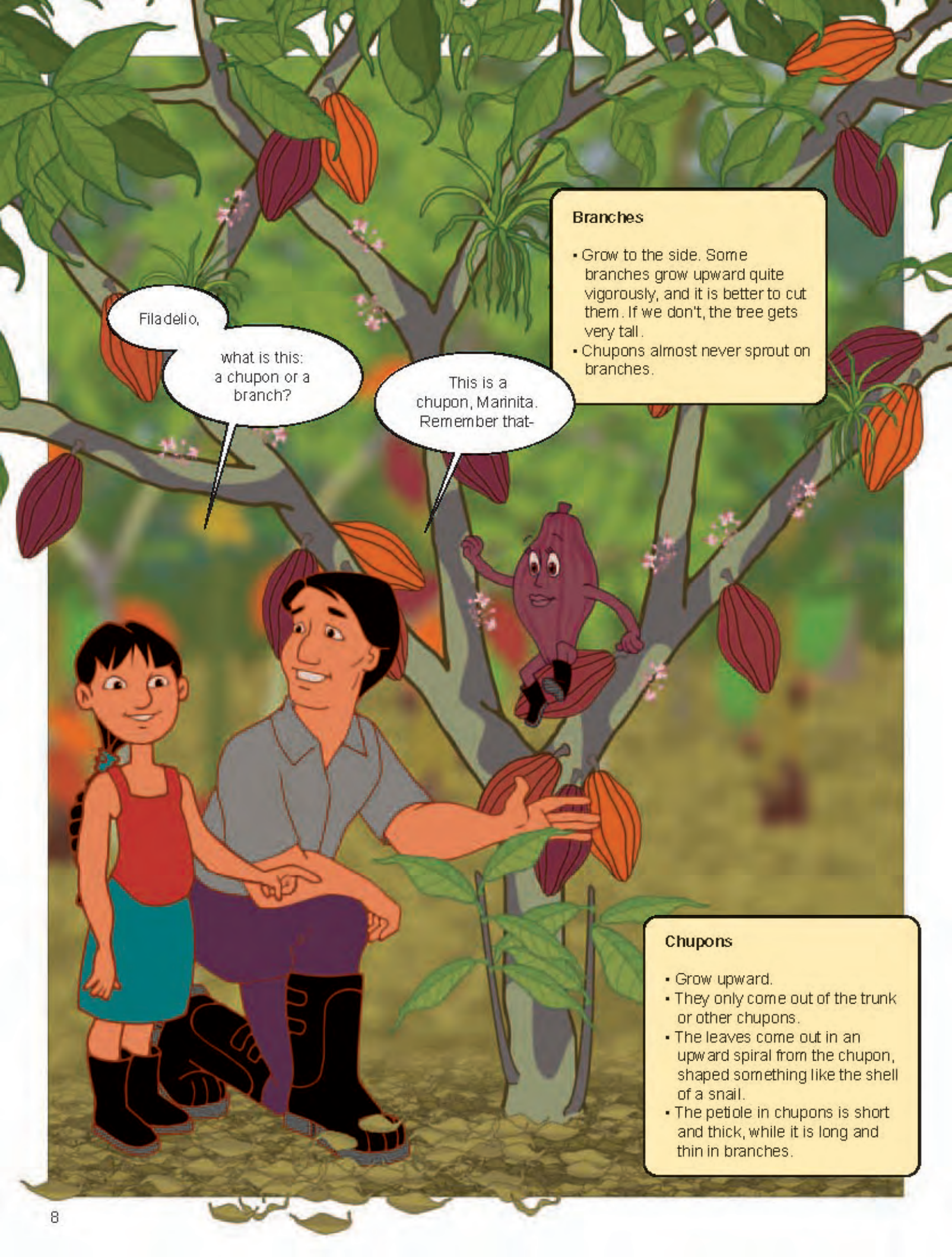
**Branches:** let the tree spread out. The first branches grow from the main horquette and are called primary branches. Secondary branches grow from the primary branches and tertiary branches from the secondary branches, thus giving shape and size to the crown of the tree.

**Branch collar:** is the bulge at the base of the branch where it is attached to the trunk or to another branch. There are substances in the collar that help seal wounds rapidly, without producing decay. For this reason the branches should be cut just above the collar in order not to damage it.

**Chupons, or suckers:** are shoots that grow upward, forming a horquette, or fork, from which four or five branches emerge. The trunk is a chupon and from it new chupons can sprout. If they are left to grow, they form new horquettes, adding new "floors" to the tree. If this sprouting of chupons is not controlled, the tree could grow to be 15 meters high.

**The main stem or trunk** of the tree forms a horquette from which four or five primary branches appear—the horquette generally forms at about the height of a person's chest. Most of the fruits produced by the tree are concentrated on the trunk and primary branches.





Filadelio,

what is this:  
a chupon or a  
branch?

This is a  
chupon, Marinita.  
Remember that-

### Branches


- Grow to the side. Some branches grow upward quite vigorously, and it is better to cut them. If we don't, the tree gets very tall.
- Chupons almost never sprout on branches.

### Chupons

- Grow upward.
- They only come out of the trunk or other chupons.
- The leaves come out in an upward spiral from the chupon, shaped something like the shell of a snail.
- The petiole in chupons is short and thick, while it is long and thin in branches.

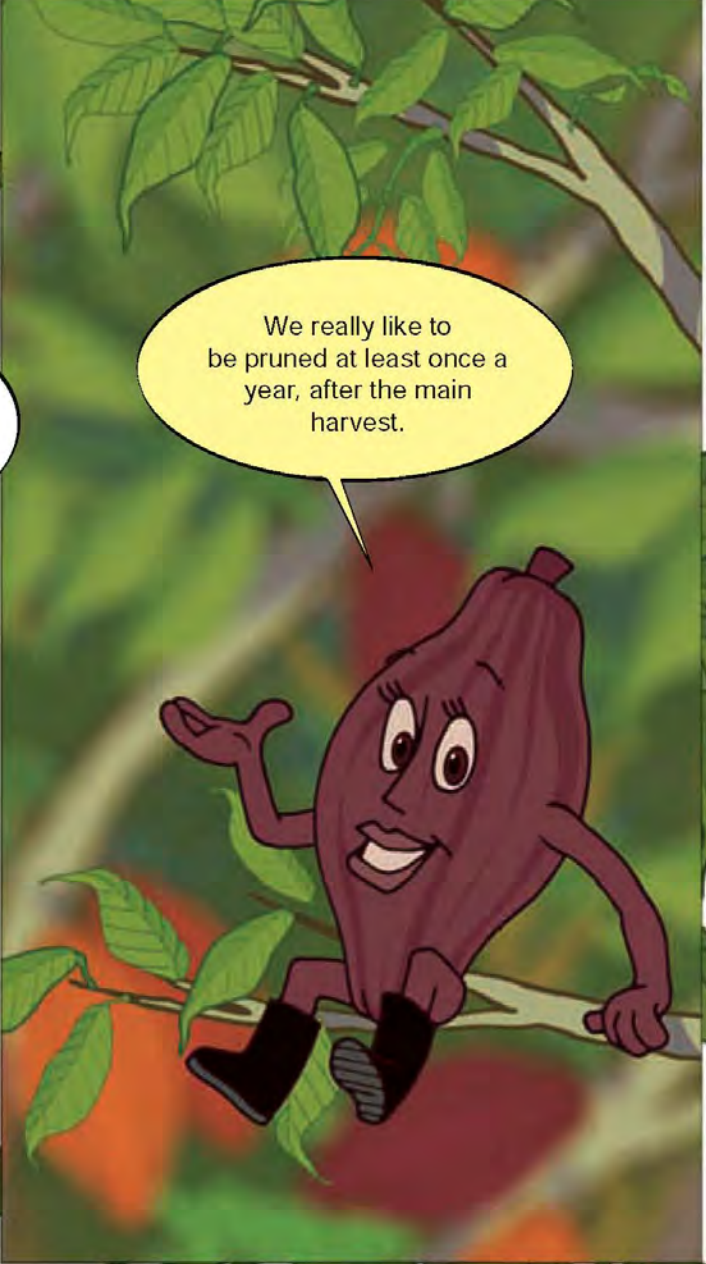


## Now to the pruning




Beginning today, we are going to do a better job of pruning the cacao farm.

That's right. Then our cacao production will go up.



We really like to be pruned at least once a year, after the main harvest.



Use a sealer to heal the cuts and avoid diseases and decay on the trunks, branches or thick chupons.

Sealing paste is made from lime or ash, mixed with cooking oil and a little bit of copper oxychloride, which is a powder for killing fungus that is OK to use in organic agriculture.

We spread the mixture over the cuts with a spatula.



We also need to review some of the activities and tools that we use in pruning cacao.

I am going to try really hard to memorize these words. It's just that sometimes my tongue gets tied up in knots and I get mixed up.

OK, my little friend, just pay close attention. You'll get it.

### Bark

the skin or shell that covers the wood of the trunks and branches.

### Tip a branch

cut off the tip of the branch.

### Spores

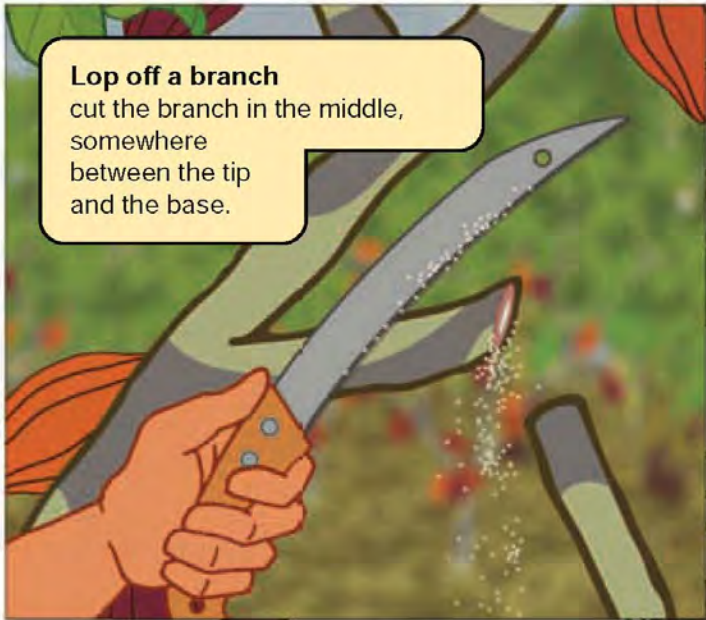
the seeds of fungi such as monilia, witches' broom or black pod. Wind, water and insects can easily carry the spores from one place to another and infect the cacao plants.

**Moniliasis**  
(*Moniliophthora roreri*)

### Living space of a tree

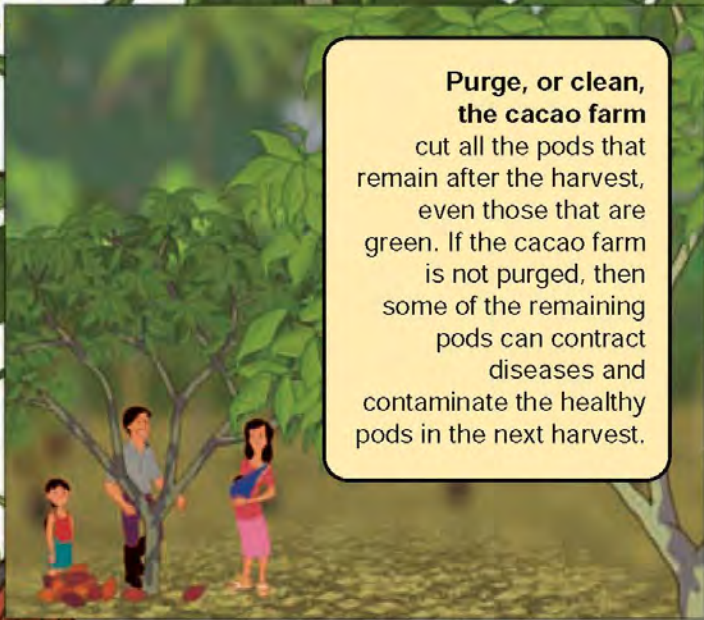
the land that each cacao tree needs to grow and produce well in the cacao farm.






**Lop off a branch**

cut the branch in the middle, somewhere between the tip and the base.



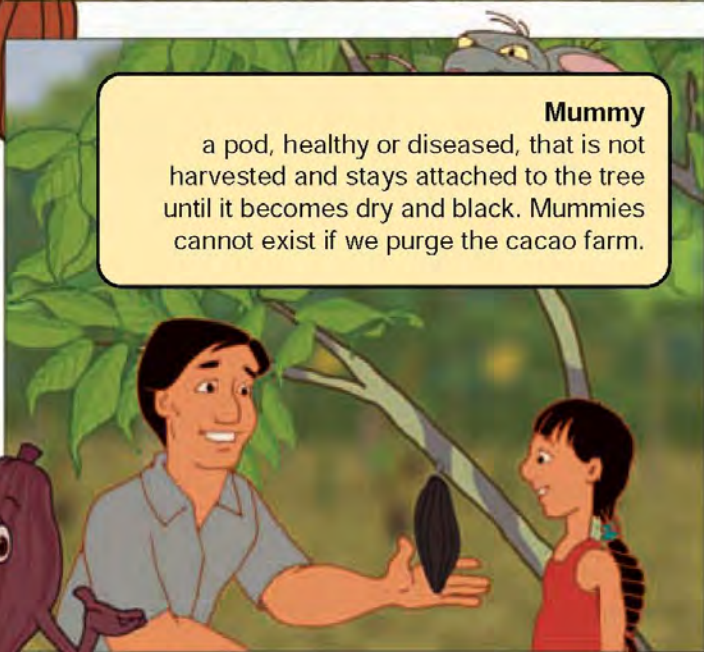
**Purge, or clean, the cacao farm**

cut all the pods that remain after the harvest, even those that are green. If the cacao farm is not purged, then some of the remaining pods can contract diseases and contaminate the healthy pods in the next harvest.



**Stumps**

the pieces of branches or trunks that are left when we don't cut evenly.



**Mummy**

a pod, healthy or diseased, that is not harvested and stays attached to the tree until it becomes dry and black. Mummies cannot exist if we purge the cacao farm.



**Stumping**

cutting the tree trunk from the base, a little above the soil line (about 30 centimeters), so that it puts out new chupons and we can begin to reconstruct the crown. Since chupons can put out roots, select the one nearest the ground and put some dirt at the base so that it produces its own roots and can live on its own, without depending on the roots of the stumped tree.



## Tools used in cacao pruning

The short machete are used to make clean cuts, like a knife.

The mallet can be made with a piece of hardwood, coated and protected with a metal tube.

Speaking of pruning, let's talk about tools. Here are the main tools that are used to prune and harvest cacao.

1) Many producers prune the cacao using a long machete, cutting freehand, without the mallet. But the cut often misses the mark and causes wounds on the branches or leaves small stumps that cause decay in the tree and reduce the harvest.

2) The cacao tree should be pruned with a short machete and a mallet, so that all the cuts are clean and perfect and heal quickly.





**A curved pruning saw** is good for cutting branches and thick chupons, especially when other branches make it difficult to use a straight machete.



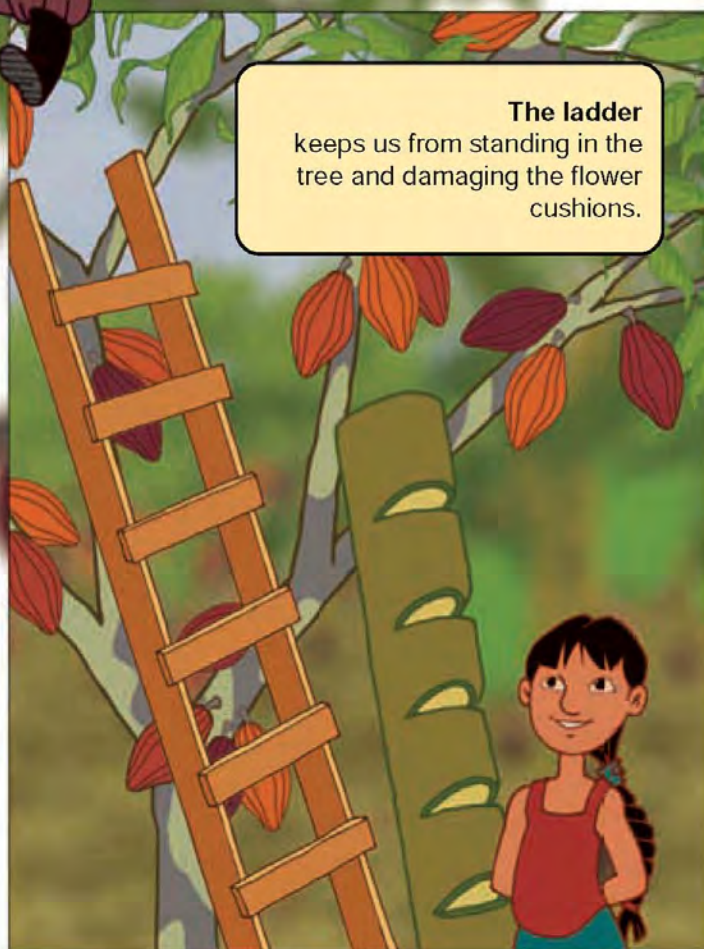
**Pruning shears** are perfect to cut thin stems and mature pods, both healthy and diseased.



**The chuza** a pruning pole with a double-edged blade, is used to harvest mature or diseased fruits that we cannot reach by hand and even to cut high, thin branches-let's say about an inch (2½ centimeters) thick.



**The ladder** keeps us from standing in the tree and damaging the flower cushions.







What is that other tool?

**The pole pruners**  
It is a long rod that has pruning shears at the end.

You can cut branches that are high on the crown without using a ladder. To cut a branch with the pole pruner,

just pull the cord and the shears at the end cut the branch. Some pole pruners also have a curved saw at the end.



**The chainsaw**  
is used mainly for stumping or to cut very thick branches or trunks.

We can go together-family members, friends or maybe even other families-to buy a chainsaw and take turns using it.

What a great idea! Count me in.



## The six steps

Now we are going to see in detail how to prune a cacao tree. The first thing we need to realize is that each tree is unique and has to be pruned according to its characteristics.

We must learn what it is that we should cut in each tree.

The pruning methods that we are going to demonstrate are very simple. We only have to ask ourselves these six questions when pruning each tree:

**1**

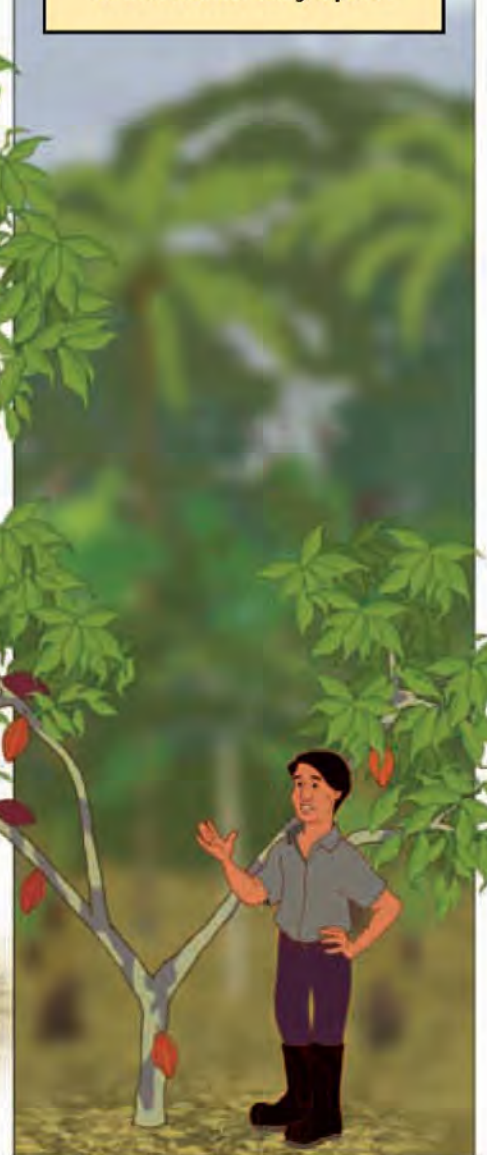
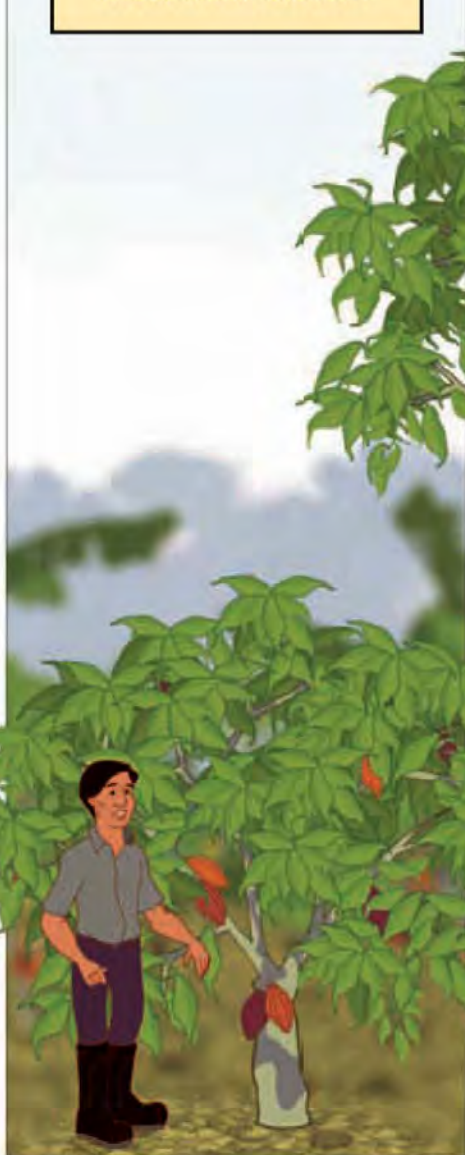
Is the crown too low?

**2**

Is the crown very high?

**3**

Is the crown very open?





4

Is the crown very closed?



5

Are the branches intertwined with those of neighboring trees?



6

Is the crown unbalanced?



A tree can have several of these problems at the same time,

can't it?

Yes it can, Flory. For that very reason we will talk about each one of these problems separately.

Fidelio, will you talk to us about crowns that are too low?



## 1. A very low crown

I'd be glad to, Cecilia.

A low crown occurs when some branches curve or grow downward, almost touching the ground.

Why is a low crown a problem?

Some of the fungi, bacteria or insects that attack cacao live in the soil, for example the black pod fungus.

If the branch is very close to the soil, drops of water contaminated with these fungi can splash on the branches and leaves when it rains and then the plant gets sick.

The low branches do not allow air to circulate and they create humid environments that favor development of fungi such as monilia, black pod and witches' broom.

In addition, the low branches make it difficult to walk through the farm and reduce visibility.

What can we do when the branches are very low?

Cut or tip the branches to raise the crown.



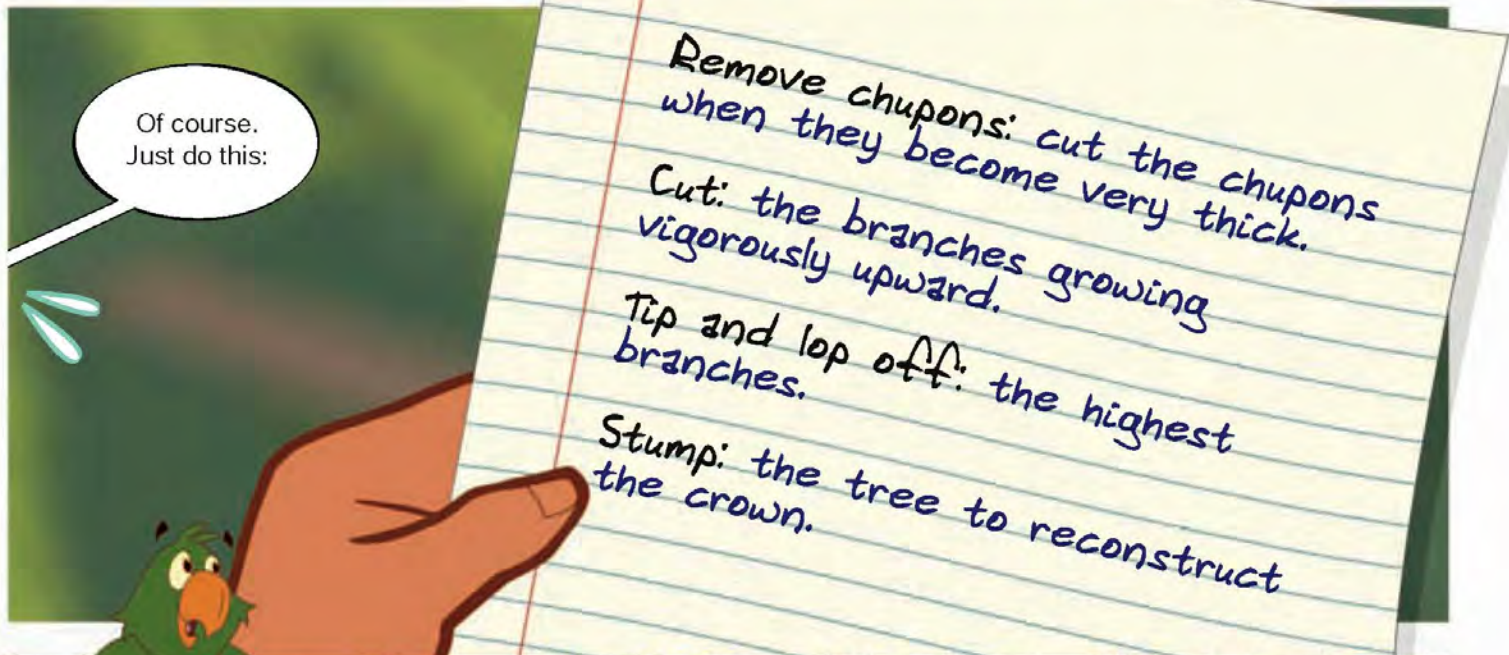
## 2. Very high crown



See that pod up there? See how difficult it would be to harvest it? And from here, we cannot see whether it is diseased.

It is difficult to cut it because it is so high.

Can such high branches be prevented?



Of course. Just do this:

*Remove chupons: cut the chupons when they become very thick.*

*Cut: the branches growing vigorously upward.*

*Tip and lop off: the highest branches.*

*Stump: the tree to reconstruct the crown.*



When lopping off a very large or heavy branch, we should be careful that it does not break off.

Yes, Flory, and it is very easy to avoid having it break off. To prune a heavy branch, first remove weight from the branch by lopping it off at 50 centimeters from its base, then cut off the branch at the exact point where you want to prune the branch.



### 3. Very open Crown



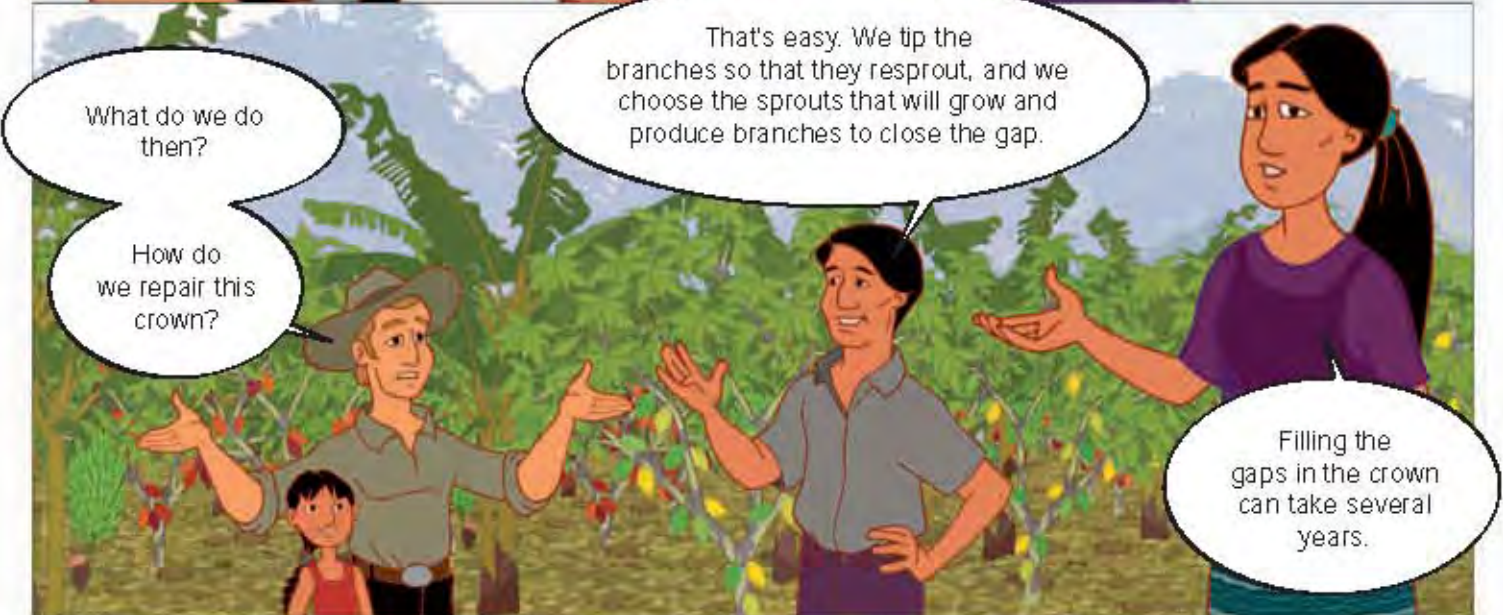
Sometimes we find trees that have gaps in the crown, where there are no branches or leaves.

Look at this branch.

The sun strikes directly on these primary branches and the trunk, causing sunburn on the bark of the exposed branch and on the trunk.

Very open crowns can form when the tree loses a primary branch.

True. A couple of weeks ago, a plantain fell on this cacao tree and broke a branch.



What do we do then?

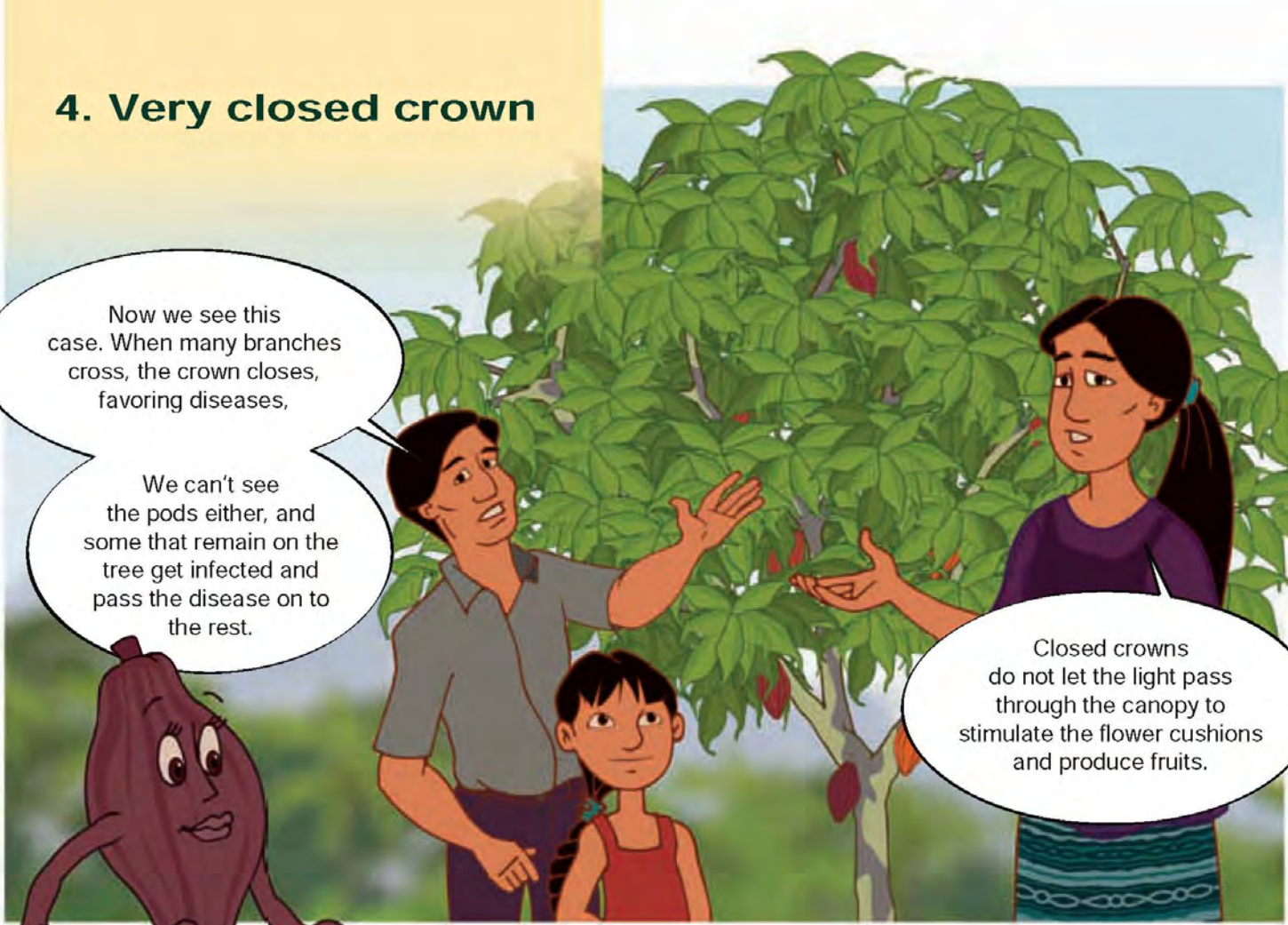
How do we repair this crown?

That's easy. We tip the branches so that they resprout, and we choose the sprouts that will grow and produce branches to close the gap.

Filling the gaps in the crown can take several years.



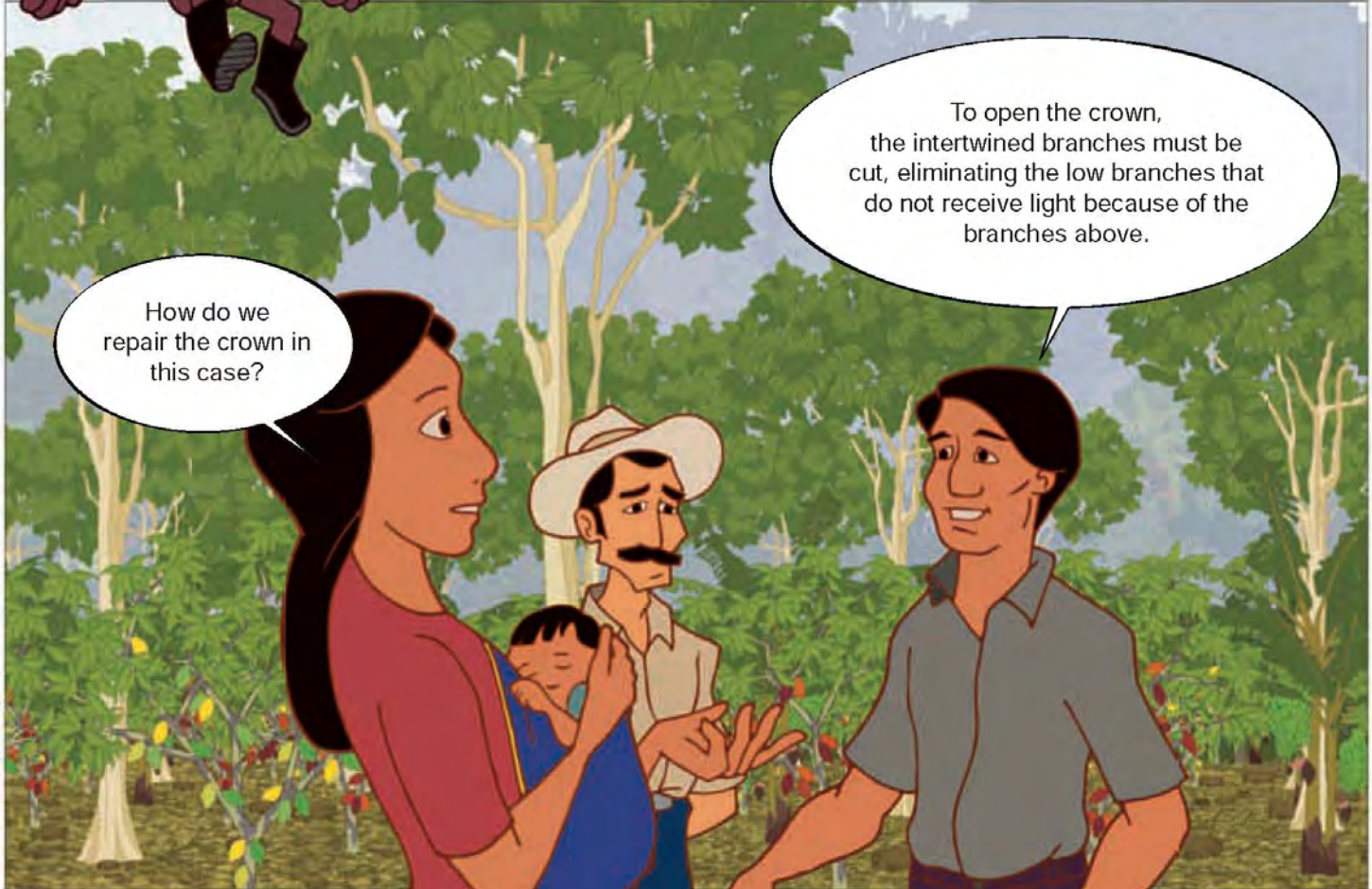
## 4. Very closed crown



Now we see this case. When many branches cross, the crown closes, favoring diseases,

We can't see the pods either, and some that remain on the tree get infected and pass the disease on to the rest.

Closed crowns do not let the light pass through the canopy to stimulate the flower cushions and produce fruits.



How do we repair the crown in this case?

To open the crown, the intertwined branches must be cut, eliminating the low branches that do not receive light because of the branches above.



## 5. Branches intertwined with those of other trees

When trees are planted very close together or when they are not pruned regularly, the branches of one cacao tree enter the living space of its neighboring trees.

This is not good. Each cacao tree should have its own living space to grow so that it can produce well.

Intertwined branches hinder tree management, produce a lot of shade and humidity that foster disease, and reduce flowering.

And how do we fix that problem?


It's not complicated. We stand halfway between the tree we are pruning and each one of its neighboring trees.

We look up and tip and lop off all the branches that come into and pass through the midpoint between the two trees.


We do this with all of the trees next to the one we are pruning, going full circle, and thus defining its living space. We do this with each tree.



## 6. Balanced and unbalanced crowns



The crown of cacao trees naturally develop evenly, balanced, with branches growing in all directions.




But during the life of the tree, the crown can become unbalanced because it loses one or more primary branches due to diseases or because the branch of another tree or a plantain plant falls on it.




To balance the crown, branches must be allowed to grow in the open part so that the tree occupies all of its living space. By filling in the crown, we will have more branches, more leaves, more flowers and a greater harvest.


The practices that we recommend to close the open crown are the same that apply in balancing the crown.



How pretty we look when we are well-pruned!




Yes, just seeing you so pretty and loaded with fruit makes me hungry!




Calm down, monkey. We haven't finished yet!



## Cleaning Up the Tree




Continuemos.  
Al podar también debemos aprovechar para sanear el árbol haciendo lo siguiente:




Mantengamos los árboles de cacao con una buena cantidad de esas plantas que viven en el árbol de cacao,

pero sin chupar su savia, porque retienen agua y son beneficiosas para las mosquitas polinizadoras.



Arranquemos el musgo de las partes donde nacen la mayoría de las flores porque tapa los cojines florales y perjudica la producción de frutos.



Al arrancar el musgo usemos guantes porque ahí se esconden a veces pequeñas serpientes, alacranes y otros insectos peligrosos.



My father told me that birds eat the fruit of the parasitic plants and infect cacao and shade trees when they defecate on their branches, and then they deposit the seeds of these plants.



Now it looks like we birds are to blame. Imagine-  
now we cannot even defecate on trees! Then I say that bird latrines need to be put in the cacao farm!



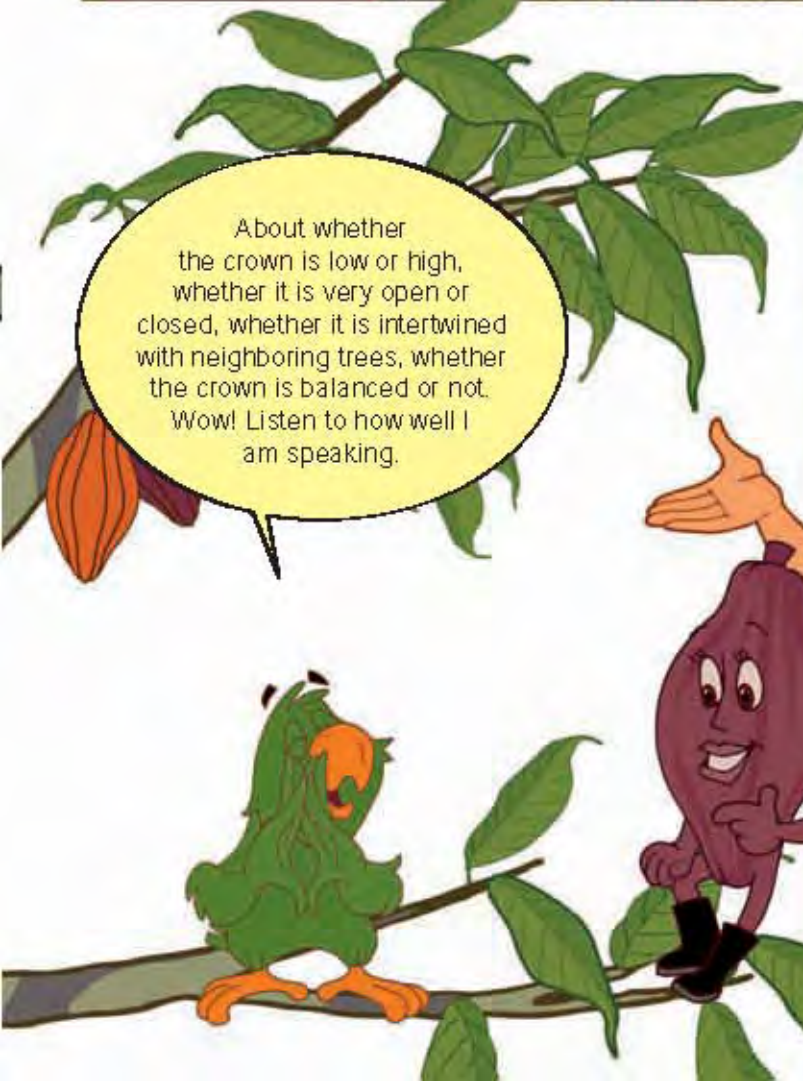
This toucan turns out to be a good lawyer and political activist. I side with the toucan.





Let's review what we have talked about today.

We talked about pruning cacao and how it improves the harvests. We saw that there are six steps to follow when pruning a cacao tree.



About whether the crown is low or high, whether it is very open or closed, whether it is intertwined with neighboring trees, whether the crown is balanced or not. Wow! Listen to how well I am speaking.



We also saw that each cacao tree is different and we need to know what to do in each case.



Sometimes we cut to remove parts of the crown, other times we cut so that new branches can sprout or so that a tree can have a completely new crown.

The six pruning steps serve as a guide for us, so that we do not forget any of the details. Now we know that we must make clean cuts, using proper tools such as a short machete and a mallet, a curved pruning saw and pruning shears.

A well-cared-for cocoa farm produces more cacao and better cacao. The secret is to prune after each harvest.

Look how beautiful our cacao farm is now-it looks completely different!





Working so hard pruning this cacao farm has given me an appetite. I am so tired. I think I deserve a week off. After all, I have to take care of myself.

Ha, ha, ha. That's so funny, monkey, I didn't see you cut even one branch!

But you are right. I am hungry too. Let's finish our meeting and go out for lunch!



## Glossary

**Bark:** Skin or shell that covers the wood of the trunks and branches.

**Black pod:** Cacao disease; scientific name *Phytophthora* spp.

**Branch collar:** Bulge at the base of the branch where it is attached to the trunk or the branch from which it sprouted.

**Flower cushions:** Bulges on the on the trunk and branches from which the flowers emerge.

**Living space of the tree:** Land that each cacao tree in the farm occupies in order to grow and produce well.

**Lop off:** Cut off the branches somewhere in the middle, between the tip and the base.

**Monilia:** Cacao disease; scientific name *Moniliophthora roreri*.

**Mummy:** Pod, healthy or diseased, that is not harvested and stays attached to the tree until it becomes dry and black.

**Purge the cacao farm:** After the harvest, eliminate all the pods that remain, even if they are not mature.

**Remove chupons:** Cut the chupons.

**Spores:** Seeds of funguses such as monilia, witches' broom and black pod.

**Stumps:** Pieces of branches or trunks that are left when we don't cut evenly.

**Tip:** Remove the tips of the branches.

**Witches' broom:** cacao disease; scientific name *Moniliophthora perniciosa*.