

PLANT LORE--NATIVE AND EXOTIC

by

Mrs. Stanley Kitching

Mrs. Mary Malone interviews Mrs. Kitching and introduces her as the "Plant Expert."

Mrs. Kitching: "I don't know about the expert bit but you're interested in knowing how Key West was when the Spaniards came. I can only go on presumption in what I see growing in the Keys now. There are many things to determine on what could possibly have been growing here--elevation for one thing. I do believe that bouganvillia was growing natively in Key West because there is enough elevation to have them grow well because the trees that are here now are of such size that they had to be here many years ago. Our native trees have a certain height at which they will grow; this is obvious in the Keys. You start with your white mangroves, your red mangroves, your black mangroves, your buttonwood, and on that line is where you find your manchineel, your most toxic tree. From there, go to the Jamaica Dogwoods, the gumbo limbos, inkwoods; there are quite a few trees. There's also another smaller tree--sometimes considered between a shrub and a tree--the ~~yellowed~~ ^{Joe} wood which is familiar in the Keys and grows on flats which are subject to inundation at least on high tide several times a year.

As far as Key West is concerned, there ^{are} a lot of Stoppers--all of the eugenia family--that are quite predominant along the lower keys and and I'm sure there were quite a few in Key West because the Conchs gave them the name of Stoppers. They're quite an attractive small shrub and probably marlberries on them, at that time.

There aren't too many fruit trees as such; there's the purge nut which grows all the way up into the Carolinas; our species is just a little bit different than that one up there. Theirs will take the cold but this one will not. I don't think there were many lime trees down here at the time; perhaps there were but they don't last that long, however, someone may have brought some in from the outer islands and planted them here. (Before "Donna" there were many lime trees around in the uninhabited areas of the ~~island~~ ^{Keys}. These were picked and shipped up north--a statement injected by Mrs. Malone).

Perhaps ^{there} ~~they~~ were Spanish limes as I have found these growing along the beach and have identified the seed. They definitely were not planted but the seeds were, no doubt, tossed around by boaters.

There were a few things that possibly could be eaten--seagrapes for one. It's quite prevalent along the beaches and all. Pigeon plum is edible--there's not too much meat on it--and some other small fruits. I'm sure the wild fig was here at the time

Some of the plants here could be used for horticultural landscaping--some can be propagated and some will do it on their own. Our sea lavender is very pretty but will grow only in certain areas and no one has been able to find a way to propagate it; they've tried seeds and cuttings but nothing seems to work. Of course, the Key West face has changed so much since the original island; the filling of land, changing the contour, changing the beachfront ^{here}. One thing I'm not sure of is whether the Australian Pines were 200 years ago or not. The only place you find them on the Keys is where there was a natural sand beach.

I believe the Geiger tree is one of the prettiest native trees in the lower keys. It is said the original Geiger tree is on the grounds of the Audubon House which was originally Geiger's home. They do get much larger up state perhaps because there's much further for the roots to go. Some of these are much prettier than others because of the difference in blooms or shape.

There are lots of small trees and shrubs--the potato tree which the birds like. Another is the seaside hibiscus which is especially good for seaside planting. Some of the trees that are growing now have become naturalized in the fact that they will propagate themselves without the help of man. How they were brought in is anyone's guess.

Mrs. Malone injected here her thoughts--that the seafarers that settled here brought something with them and certainly the settlers from the Bahamas brought rock roses and they were, undoubtedly, brought originally from England.

We have our 7-year apple too that is quite prevalent on the Keys. It is a small tree with a very shiny leaf; gets fruit on it that almost looks like a dried prune. It's dark in color, considered a survival food, and tastes like a fig. As for the name "7-year" I can't explain it except that it may take 7 years to bear fruit. I am sure that the tree survives longer than seven years.

We cleared ^{gymninda} our own place on Sugarloaf Key. ^{sophora} At that time I was not as well acquainted with the various trees and shrubs as I am now. There was a lot of stopper, ~~escinnida~~, pigeon plum, seagrape, ~~supero~~ which is on our conservation list, and has a very pretty vine which hangs down like a necklace with little yellow flowers; we had inkwood, marlberry, ~~serine~~, holly, and many others native to the keys. ^{myrsina}

The Botanical Gardens, I'm sure are on an 8 ft. elevation, as there are many lignum vitae thriving there. However, I've seen some much larger right here in Key West. The largest one seems to be on the corner of Truman and Florida Street and has been that big for many years. It seems they grow a certain height and then stop growing. Also, in an extreme drought, they are the only type tree with any leaves left on it. Lignum vitae means "life" and is the most dense wood in the western hemisphere. It is so hard that in order to work with it you have to use metal cutting tools. It was used for shaft bearings in ships--as a matter of fact, it still is used for this purpose in some areas. It has a natural oil that keeps itself self-lubricating. It is very heavy. It's practically impervious to fire. In woods that have burned, the stumps of lignum vitae seem not affected. It is used in many ways, and once it is cut, it has a natural sheen of its own. To my knowledge, it has not been used for building but could be if someone had the patience to love their work enough to bring it to a finished product.

Getting back to the Botanical Gardens--it was started back in the WPA days. It has changed quite a bit from the original. There were 30 some acres there; now there are about six acres left. The rest of the acreage was encroached upon and used for public purposes. The Aqueduct Commission has acquired land for tanks; the Center of Hope is on part of the original land; the Humane Society is there, the Golf Course has gotten some; the old General Hospital is now office buildings and takes quite a lot of our old space. The Garden Club became involved because more space was wanted for a big water tank which would have taken another hunk. We just hope to keep some of it for posterity.

It is about the last natural hammock area in the Key West area, even though it is on Stock Island, it is on city property. It's slow going but we're making headway. It's progressed since three years ago when we wanted to get it cleared out. It was a big job and if it hadn't been for the help of the marines, we wouldn't have come as far as we have; this was wonderful help being dropped in our laps. They had 25 to 30 men that could work on it from time to time. We started out with about 15 the first morning; it was complete mayhem that day. We had gone in prior to that time and tagged as many trees as we could under the circumstances--the circumstances being that to get to the completely wild places you had to get down on your hands and knees to get to the ~~dead~~ trees. Naturally these strong marines wanted to take on the biggest trees first.

columbrina
Primarily the only things that were taken out were the Florida Holly and the ~~...~~ Asiatic had gone wild. These two culprits along had done more damage to the trees that had been introduced into the garden than any other thing out there. The Florida Holly just seeds and reseeds and gets to be impenetrable. The initial parts where new plantings were made --and where new trees were introduced--are fairly clear now to the point where it can be mowed with a riding mower or a hand mower.. About six months ago, we hired equipment to go in there and pull the stumps out because they were starting to sprout again. We have the majority of the large ones out of there now. We're leaving the strip between the aqueduct commission and the golf course that extends on back--that will be a nature trail and will be left as is, other than keep the paths open through it. We'll probably have to tag the poison wood so the people don't go up and touch the shiny leaves on it. Otherwise we are going to leave that natural and it will lead from one pond back to the other. It is quite a pretty walk through there.

When all this was going on the Chairman of the project was very sensitive to poison wood but she went out there to assist, blisters and all. People do react differently to this poison wood; some will blister, some will swell up. There is medication now to alleviate this though.

So many people who move to Key West from up north want the kind of plants they had up there and so very often this doesn't work well for them. The modern trend is to go to the native plants that survive on what nature has to offer. With our water shortage and more people coming down here, this makes a lot of sense. Even the so-called exotics, once they're established, will survive naturally.

The new trees I've planted, such as the bottle brush, the African tulip, many others, easily survive with little care once they're started. The Hong Kong orchid tree blooms in the winter - a beautiful tree and doesn't drop its seeds; there's another one that blooms in the summer that does drop seeds all over the place so new shoots spread rapidly. These trees I've mentioned went through 3 feet of salt water in 1965. However, we had three days of rain just prior to the storm so this may have been the reason for their survival.

I would imagine that the early settlers planted trees that would give them something to eat--possibly the sapodilla, and believe that's when the Spanish limes started, and also the Key limes. The Key limes were probably brought in by passing ships. That is how Englishmen began to be called Limeys. They made up what we call here "Old Sour" which was made from lime juice and salt. It was put in kegs and allowed to ferment.***

*The ponds are fresh water. (Ed. note)
**On long voyages, the ships' company had to drink it every day to prevent scurvy. Conchs use it on fish.

Actually, I believe that the sapodilla was used more in the old days than it is now. When you find a sapodilla tree on the keys and you can get through the brush to get at it, usually you'll find remnants of an old home site. They survive well and are easy to spot by their rich green leaves; they do well completely ignored.

Coconuts probably were here, as far as food was concerned; I don't think they had to be introduced. They brought in egg fruit which is edible (if you like it) and would imagine they brought in bananas. Banana trees need a lot of water so don't know how they survived. (Mrs. Malone injected here that most of the early settlers lived on the far end of the island where there was fresh water. Most everyone had a well and there were windmills.) They probably also had plantains too which ^{are} considered very nourishing. The Cuban people brought in the ~~Yucca~~ which is a potato substitute. Possibly the elephant ear plant was also brought in.

There's what is called the Key West grape. I don't know exactly how they got started but there's a story about a family in Stock Island who purchased grapes in the store and threw the seeds out the window and they just started growing. Whether this is fact or fantasy, I'm not sure. However, grapes will grow here, but the birds get them first.

Papaya is another fruit that was introduced that is fast growing. Cooks used to wrap meat in papaya leaves and put it in the refrigerator; it was a tenderizing process. The commercial tenderizer is now made from papaya. The home remedies used cured many illness including malaria.

The Avacado was probably introduced; there are many different types of seedlings growing in the area. A mango, I believe was a recent arrival as there are not many here. However, every child in Key West knows where every mango is so the owners get very little fruit off their own trees. Residents having the trees have cut them down so it seems they're gradually disappearing but they do grow well here in Key West.

Guava is, no doubt, one of the early fruits introduced here too. It's a very hearty tree and used to do much better than it does now as the Caribbean fruit fly seems to get to it very fast. This fruit makes excellent jams, jellies, paste, cakes. Many local recipes using this fruit came from Key West people.

There is an Indian Squash that does well down here; it looks like a pale pumpkin. I believe the sour orange was brought in by the Spanish people; it was used for marinating--pork especially. (Mrs. Malone has made marmelade from sour oranges and stated it was delicious.)

The flowering trees in the Key West area are especially beautiful. The Poinciana has been around for a long time; the Woman's Tongue has always been a conversation piece because of the rattling seed pods. In the summer time, it's bare but in the winter it's a pretty green tree. It's native in the keys because there are some growing wild in the unpopulated areas. Many of the things that grow here grow in Cuba too, but they have a more varied terrain down there than we have here. Also, their soil is much better. They don't have to replant Sugar Cane the way they do in Puerto Rico; it just comes right up. They harvest theirs differently too. The best way is to hand cut it rather than burn it. Even though their soil is better there, there are things that will grow better here than there.

Grass is almost an impossible thing to grow here unless it's a hobby and in a small spot. (Mrs. Malone stated that she sometimes put wet seaweed on her ~~shrubbery~~ and then has it mowed right away but has to keep it away from the shrubbery).

lawn

Getting back to the trees here, the sugarapple, the soursops, the carombola or the star apple, are all native to the keys except the carombola, perhaps, which is fairly new here. It does very well in a protected spot if it gets plenty of water. The stinleaf is another tree native to the keys; it has a small fruit about 1/2 inch ~~long~~ long and maybe 3/8 of an inch in diameter. When it's ripe, it is a dark purple. It almost looks like a straight jelly bean. It is edible and good for making jam too. It's a cousin to the star apple and is a West Indies fruit. To look at the trees, it would be difficult to distinguish one from the other because they both have the copper-colored underside leaf.

I'm sure if all the native trees were left to grow and multiply, Key West would be a very lush place. However, due to space and the number of people in a given area, there just wasn't much room left.

The biggest problem is that so many people consider trees messy. Perhaps they are--some of them worse than others--but many only shed once or twice a year. The sandbox tree does shed but it is such an interesting tree; it gets so very big. (Mrs. Malone states that the sap of these trees is very poisonous). They have very bad thorns on them so they're definitely no good for kids to climb. Also the pods that fall eventually explode, scattering tiny seeds like dust.

There have been many types of fig trees introduced here too but don't believe anyone uses the fruit; there's one at the end of South street that's always loaded but don't believe the dates are considered edible because they're not tasty but they're not poisonous to my knowledge. Their roots spread to the point where they would lift the foundation of a house so should be planted in the wide open spaces and away from everything else. What got these started was the fact that when builders would build a house, they'd plant these trees because it was the fastest growing tree and they felt the landscaping would take shape in a hurry. Because of our rock soil down here, roots can just go down so far and then spread out and up.

The fruits on some of the palm trees are edible but wouldn't suggest that they go around and eat the fruit off of any of them until they're sure which ones are good. The fishtail is very caustic; in fact, if you get fresh seeds that still have the meat on them, don't take it off with your bare hands or they'll burn. People should be very cautious about tasting the various fruits off these trees unless they know for sure it's edible.

The crotons, I believe, was introduced here although I believe Florida has a wild plant which is just a plain green leaf plant and doesn't look anything like our colorful crotons. The croton is supposed to be poisonous. Another thing to watch is to not have good clothes on if you're going to walk through the bushes as it will stain. A banana tree will do the same thing and, incidentally, do not ever park a car under a banana tree. If any of the sap drips out, it will take the paint right down to the bare metal.

The drippings from a gumbo limbo tree, I am told, can be used in candle wax and makes a candle that will smell like incense. It also removes paint from the top of a parked car at night.

Buckaneer

The ~~Buckaneer~~ Palm is a native tree that originally grew on Long Key and Elliott Key. I am told that the men working on the Flagler Railroad who would get time off to come to Key West and would bring the seeds with them. So some of the older Buckaneer palms that you see growing in Key West came from Long Key rather than Elliott Key because there was no boat connection from Elliott Key at that time. I believe the last one that existed on Long Key has succumbed to the bulldozers. They are quite predominant throughout the Caribbean and, according to a book that I have, each island has its own botanical difference between the species; they have tried to break them down as to which island they came from. Another common name for it is Cherry Palm. It's a very attractive palm but slow growing. It seems to be resistant to the lethal yellowing--at least so far.

Sebals

There are quite a few palms that have been introduced--and so it is said that many started from bird droppings. The ~~Sebals~~ have been brought in by the road department; there is a ~~seba~~ palmetto growing on Cudjoe Key and it's a much smaller squat tree, perhaps due to the fact that the roots can't get very deep. But, they are native to the Keys (at least most of them); there are quite a few at Sugarloaf and at Cudjoe. That's the only place I've noticed them on the Keys. I noticed those on Cudjoe when we first came down here in 1950 and they have not grown much since.

Wenokebach

Mr. ~~Wenokebach~~ (Winky) has been very interested in Palms; we had very much taken our native palms for granted but he estimated the palms in our backyard as being 150 years old.
