

USEFUL AND MEDICINAL PLANTS OF THE FLORIDA KEYS

I have been asked to repeat the presentation of a paper I presented to this Club two years ago, on useful and medicinal plants that are or can be raised on the Florida Keys, and (I) trust that we may have questions and discussions on them. My information is gathered by personal experience, and from old residents; also from books by Dr. Gifford(John C.) and Dr. Fairchild(David G.). Dr. Gifford resided and botanized on the Keys for many years.

The original settlers had no access to a doctor or to medicine except by long boat trips sailing to Key West.

One of the most useful to the natives and brought to them from the Bahamas in 1865, was the Barbados Aloe(Aloe Vera). Every home had plants for burns, cuts, insect bites. To take internally, a leaf was cut up and placed in a crock, covered with water, and bruised. After 24 hours, the resulting fluid was taken as a drink for what we call ulcers, or as a laxative. They called it Belly Ac he. The Aloes of commerce, used in many prescriptions, is a powder made from the dried jelly of this plant. There are large plantings in Dade and Lee Counties, sold commercially.

The next most used plant was the Pawpaw. It seemed to be native to the Keys, and though small in the wild state, as it is today, was used by puncturing the green fruit. Then a white juice exuded. It was put in bottles and diluted with water for(use as) a digestive. The leaves were wrapped around meats for tenderizing, and the black seeds(were) chewed as a tonic. Today the cultivated fruit is enjoyed by most people, and cosmetics and meat tenderizers are made commercially and sold all over the country. We call it Paypaya.

The Gumbo Limbo Tree(Bursera), called Gum-Eleli(gumelemi) in the Island(s) was used as a tonic, the leaves boiled in water as a tea. Also, the young leaves make a poultice when crushed, which takes the sting from wasp and bee stings, and even mosquito bites. The Ranger in Everglades Park told us that the green under-bark makes a love potion. That I do not vouch for.

Datura, Angel Trumpet, or what we call Jimson Weed, is the plant furnishing the drug atropine, a heart stimulant. The old darkeys(sic) tell me they chewed the seed if their heart fluttered. It is an active poison in quantity, now used commercially.

Castor Oil Bean grows wild on the Keys, and from the seeds comes the oil of commerce, used as a cathartic. In World War I Castor Oil was used as a lubricant for airplanes.

Sapodilla(Sapoti) furnishes the chicle used in chewing gum, and was exuded from the semi-green fruit and the branches as a sticky white latex, that seemed to be a digestive.

Candle Bush(Ringworm Cassia) is an excellent treatment for skin infections -- seeds and bark steeped in water.

Golden Shower Tree leaves, when chewed, make a fine laxative.

At the other extreme is the leaves of our Rag Weed, which was eaten raw in cases of dysentery. Our common Spanish Needle makes a cough syrup when combined with honey. There are many wild bee trees on the Keys, most of them gone now via the bulldozer.

Among the smaller trees and bushes, many have uses. The seeds of the Soapberry make a substitute for soap. Our Guava and Barbados Cherry are both sources of Vitamine C. The Wax Myrtle leaves are boiled, the wax floats up on the cooling water, and from that were made candles. Bay Berry growing along the ponds is the Hamamelis, or Witch Hazel of commerce. Jamaica Dogwood trees, or Fish Fuddle, have a narcotic which will stupify(sic) fish when placed in water. The Silk Cotton Tree(Ceiba) or Kapok tree has a beautiful red tulip-shaped flower in winter. (When) the pods split open and are filled with a cottony floss around the seeds. This is the Kapok of commerce.

There are two palms native to the Keys and very hard to transplant. They were used by the older colored people and the Indians to thatch their houses and make baskets, etc. These are the Silver Palm and the Thrinx(or Key Thatch) Palm.

Pigeon Peas were used extensively as food. The bush, from 8 to 10 feet high, has a very pretty yellow pea bloom, and produces long pods filled with peas. Natives used them green or dried. There is another smaller plant, Crotalaria, also producing peas, but smaller and edible. This is also called the Rattle Tree. Birds love the seeds, and the plant is an excellent humus builder.

In 1836 Dr Perrine introduced from Mexico the Sisal Agave, and while he did not live to see it produced commercially, the old settlers and Indians told me they did weave the fiber by hand into a cloth used for small sails, and it was all the rope they had.

I have only scratched the surface of plants on the Keys, but am sure you have been bored long enough.

This is a copy of a speech presented by Mrs. Francis Tracy at the Upper Keys Garden Club meeting, February 18, 1958.