

# LEARNING ABOUT TREES AND PLANTS

A PROJECT OF  
THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP  
OF ST. JOHN, US VIRGIN ISLANDS



**GAIL KARLSSON**  
WITH SUKI DICKSON BUCHALTER, KEVEL LINDSAY  
AND ELEANOR GIBNEY



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Front cover photo: Wattapama tree in bloom

Back cover photo: Black Mangroves at sunset

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## The UUF Tree Project Team



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**Kevel Lindsay**, a native of Antigua now living in Brooklyn, New York, is a biologist and forester with a strong interest in Caribbean plants. He has worked extensively in the Virgin Islands on the region's flora and fauna, documenting many rare and endangered species. He is a co-author of *The Wild Plants of Antigua and Barbuda: An Illustrated Field Guide to the Native and Naturalised Plants*. He also maintains several Facebook groups on Caribbean natural history and flora, including one on Virgin Islands Native Plants Conservation.

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# Introduction

Gail Karlsson



*From a boat, some of St. John's hillsides look like a solid block of green.  
What's the best way to start making sense of the green blur?*

This book is meant to help both residents and visitors in identifying and learning about some of the most visible trees and plants on St. John - as well as a few less familiar ones. It is not intended to be a comprehensive field guide, however. It reflects the experiences of members of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of St. John (UUF) in observing trees near our homes, in town, and around the island during the period November 2015 to May 2016.

The first section highlights some notable trees in and around Cruz Bay. It also includes a map (on page 4) that shows the sections of town referred to, so people can see where to look for particular trees.

The second section presents photographs of trees and plants grouped by distinguishing characteristics that ordinary people can easily recognize, such as flowers, fruits or thorns. It also identifies some potentially dangerous ones.

Trees and plants, whether native or introduced, help define the unique experience of life in this place. We were interested in learning which trees were here before there were people, and how they came to be used by early settlers, as well as which ones were later introduced and cultivated for particular purposes. In some cases the answers were not entirely clear.

In addition to the natural flow of ocean currents and winds bringing seeds and wildlife, the Virgin Islands have experienced waves of human exploration, conquest, exploitation, colonialism and tourism. These have all left their marks on the landscape. Throughout the years, for many inhabitants the trees have held spiritual as well as practical life-supporting significance.

Our focus on the cultural – and spiritual – relationships between people and trees reflects one of the key Unitarian Universalist principles: “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” The national Unitarian Universalist Association has encouraged local fellowship groups to develop Green Sanctuary Programs focused on environmental study, reflection and action. Our local UUF project was organized under that broader program.

In November 2015, the UUF Green Sanctuary Committee received approval of a grant from the Urban and Community Forestry Division of the VI Department of Agriculture for a project on *Learning to Identify and Care for St. John Trees and Plants*. The Urban and Community Forestry Program (UCF) is a federal partnership organized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service, which is managed in this region by the International Institute of Tropical Forestry in Puerto Rico, and administered in the Virgin Islands by the VI Department of Agriculture.

The project goals were to learn more about the ecological and cultural roles of the trees and plants around us, and to share that information with UUF members and others in the St. John community. Our thinking was that when we notice and learn the names of the trees and plants, they become more a part of our daily life, to some extent incorporated into our family circle. We develop a greater appreciation for their complexity and their innate value, and we are more motivated to protect them from careless loss and destruction. In the course of the project, we learned that drought, deer grazing, development projects and imported pests are all now major factors affecting the lives of native trees, and their prospects for survival.

As managers of the project, Gail Karlsson and Suki Dickson Buchalter enlisted volunteers to support the planned activities, and engaged the community through public information programs and tree walks, a dedicated Facebook page, and a website [uufstjohn.com/treeproject](http://uufstjohn.com/treeproject). Gail Karlsson also wrote a number of articles for the St. John Tradewinds newspaper referencing the UUF Tree Appreciation Project, which are posted on the UUF website.



FaceBook page: UUF Tree Appreciation Project St. John VI

This publication builds on prior UUF community outreach activities, including production of a *Smart Guide to Island Housekeeping*, which was intended to promote sustainable lifestyles ([uufstjohn.com/info/smart-guide/](http://uufstjohn.com/info/smart-guide/)). That guide had sections with information on ways to use local plants, and to preserve existing trees when preparing land for building sites, recognizing that if people aren't familiar with the local trees, they often don't care so much if they are lost.

In following up on our efforts to preserve local trees, we found out that it was not very easy for people to identify the trees, and to learn about their ecological roles and uses. There are some valuable resources available for reference, and we have included a list

of helpful publications and websites. However, most of the resources available are not comprehensive and/or suffer from limitations in terms of affordability, availability, and ease of use. For example, the most complete botanical guides have line drawings rather than photographs, which makes identification challenging.

At this point, people interested in identifying trees on their property generally ask one of the few experts on St. John to come look at their property. This can be inconvenient and time-consuming for everyone, and hinders the spread of useful information.

For the UUF project, we enlisted the assistance of one of the local experts on St. John, Eleanor Gibney, as well as Kevel Lindsay, an ecologist originally from Antigua. They recently worked together in preparing a report on *Plants of Conservation Concern: Herbs and Plants of the US Virgin Islands*, which was also supported by an Urban and Community Forestry grant. We are grateful for their patience and cooperation, as well as for the support we received from so many UUF members and other friends in the community. Special thanks to Ital Delroy Anthony, a local naturalist who consulted with us and led one of our tree walks. Above all we are indebted to Mary Zehngut for her grace, generosity and creativity in managing the design and production of this book.

### *Map of Locations Mentioned in Part 1 Exploring Cruz Bay*





## PART 1

### *Exploring Cruz Bay*

*One place to start learning about St. John trees is right where you get off the ferry. There are lots of trees to see in town. (Please refer to the map on page 4.) Which ones were here when the pre Columbian Taino Indians arrived, which ones are long term settlers, and which ones are right off the boat themselves?*

**Note:** Names of plants are confusing, since there are many different common names used in various places, as well as occasional changes in the officially accepted scientific names. In listing the trees and plants for this book, we have first given the scientific name and then the common name listed in the USDA Plants Database (where available), followed (if there is a difference) by the local name or names used most often on St. John.



#### *A. Cruz Bay Beach*

The *Cocos nucifera*, **Coconut Palm** trees are not originally from here but are considered to be naturalized. Because they are good to eat, coconuts are found in most of the world's tropical areas, carried from place to place by people in boats as well as by ocean currents. They probably arrived in the Caribbean less than 500 years ago. Most of the ones along St. John's beaches were planted there, not grown from seeds washed up on the shore.

The *Coccoloba uvifera*, **Sea Grape** trees seen in the photo along the beach below the coconuts are native, and common along many shorelines, though specially planted in this spot. Mostly only the birds eat the grapes off the bush, but St. Johnians have traditionally used the fruit to make jam.



### *Further down the beach:*

*Terminalia catappa*, Tropical Almond (USDA) or [East] Indian Almond is originally from the East Indies, but is now naturalized in some coastal areas of the Virgin Islands. The shiny leaves are pretty when they turn red during dry periods. Bats like to feed on the fruits, often carrying them to temporary perches or permanent roosts in caves and old buildings and dropping the seeds below their roosts. The fruits can also float, which allows them to spread on their own, and the salt-resistant seedlings help stabilize shorelines.



*Albizia lebbek*, **Woman's Tongue** is from Asia, but now relatively common in the Virgin Islands, especially on St. Croix where it is called Tibbet. People enjoy the shade it provides, as well as its lovely large flowers. Its seed pods are elongated and rattle in the wind, producing a sound like distant voices.





The *Delonix regia*, Royal Poinciana (USDA) or **Flamboyant** trees at the end of beach by the Battery wall are native to Madagascar. They have been planted all around the Caribbean, and St. John, for their beautiful crown of bright orange flowers that seems to light up the landscape. Sometimes, however, they look more skeletal, as they drop their leaves during dry periods. Often the dark, sturdy seed pods are all that is left on a deceptively dead-looking tree. These pods are locally called 'shack-shacks' and can be used as rough musical instruments, or painted for souvenirs.



The *Melicoccus bijugatus*, Spanish Lime (USDA) or **Genip** tree near the Flamboyants is one of many to be found all over St. John, some of them hundreds of years old. They were probably brought here originally in the canoes of the Taino Indians. The fruits are tasty, though acidic, and not so easy to eat. Once you break the leathery skin the small amount of pulp is firmly attached to a large inner seed. You have to roll it around in your mouth and suck off the juice. Bats take them to a palm tree and chew off the fruity part, then drop the seed on the ground. People throw the seeds, too, and now there are so many Genips growing that they are displacing other less aggressive forest trees. The Amerindians didn't waste the seeds, but roasted them to eat like nuts.

## B. At the Cruz Bay Battery

*The battery was built as a fort in the 1760s. A Danish colonial court house and jail were added in 1825. The area now houses St. John government offices.*

There is a large *Mangifera indica*, **Mango** tree right by the entrance to the Battery. Originally from southern Asia, these large trees were probably introduced by settlers in the late 1700s, and remain favorites today throughout the tropics because of their delicious fruit.



Near the walkway up to the buildings is a native *Ficus citrifolia*, Wild Banyan Tree (USDA) or **Short-leaf Fig** growing on a rock. These trees often start growing as air plants (epiphytes) on other trees, then drop aerial roots as they grow that gradually enclose the host tree.





If you explore the edge of the water directly across from the Battery entrance, you can see a stand of *Rhizophora mangle*, the native **Red Mangrove**.

These trees create a complex tangle made up of prop roots that seem to 'walk' out into the water. They create important habitats for young fish and marine organisms, and also trap sediment, sometimes creating new land. The prop roots filter the salt out of the water so it is not taken up into the tree.

You can also get a view of these Red Mangroves from across the water if you go to the end of the National Park Visitors Center building and look over towards the part of the Battery closest to the Customs Dock.

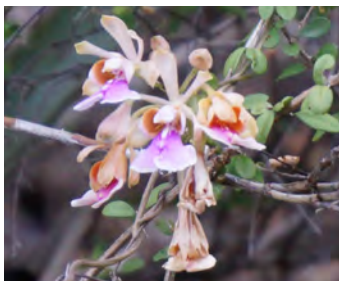
There are several other types of mangrove trees on St. John (see pages 32-33).



Nearby on the Battery peninsula, you can see a *Manilkara zapota*, Sapodilla (USDA) or **Mesple** tree not far from the shoreline. These trees are native to Mexico and the Caribbean (but not St. John), and produce edible fruits. At one point they were also cultivated for their latex, or 'chicle', which was used to make chewing gum.



Behind the Battery buildings you can see a *Psychilis macconnelliae*, Island Peacock Orchid (USDA), or **Butterfly Orchid**. This type of orchid is one of the most common of St. John's 12 different native species.



Along the shoreline back towards the Cruz Bay beach, there is a somewhat contorted-looking native *Plumeria alba*, Nosegay Tree (USDA) or **Frangipani**. This small tree with long thin leaves is prized for its lovely, fragrant white flowers. A cultivated species, *Plumeria rubra*, has wider leaves and similar white flowers (see p. 30) as well as pink, yellow and red varieties.



One of the most noticeable things about Frangipani trees is that large, brightly colored caterpillars of the *Pseudosphinx tetrio* moth appear seasonally and eat all the leaves until the trees are completely bare. This can be very disconcerting to witness, but the trees do not die, and soon grow new leaves.



*Along the shoreline of the Battery on the Cruz Bay beach side you will also find some interesting succulents and cactus.*



The non-native *Euphorbia lactea*, Mottled Spurge (USDA) or **Milk Tree** has been planted in gardens and sometimes remains in places where it was once cultivated. It is related to the *Euphorbia tirucalli*, Indiantree Spurge or [Monkey] **Pencil Tree**, which is also from Africa. (See p. 78.) Both have milky caustic sap.



The *Bryophyllum daigremontianum*, Devil's Backbone (USDA), or **Leaf of Life** from Madagascar grows tiny new plants all along its leaf edges. It is a close relative of the more commonly seen air plant *Bryophyllum pinnatum*, Cathedral Bells (USDA) or **Love Bush** (inset left) also from Madagascar. Write your lover's name on the leaf and plant it; if it grows that means your love is returned.



Climbing along the rocks, the introduced snaky *Selenicereus grandiflorus*, **Queen of the Night** cactus has dramatic white flowers. Some people have parties and stay up all night to watch when one of these is ready to bloom. It is one of several species of night blooming cacti on St. John.

### C. Cruz Bay Park

*Across the street from the beach and ferry dock:*

*Swietenia mahagoni*, **West Indian Mahogany** trees were planted in the Virgin Islands for timber, and for shade, starting in the 1700s. The ones in the park were planted in the early 1900s by Edward Moorhead, Sr.

There are also a few *Swietenia macrophylla* **Honduras Mahogany** trees on St. John, which have larger leaves (see p. 20), as well as hybrids between the two species. Some were distributed as seedlings by the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture in the mid-1900s.



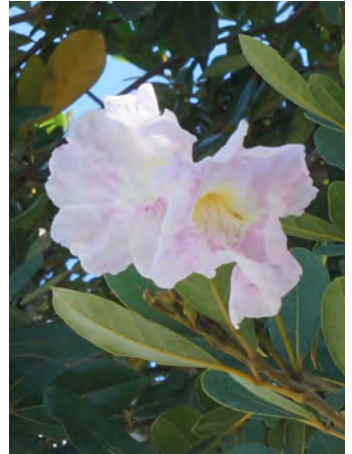
The *Tabebuia aurea*, Caribbean Trumpet-tree (USDA), locally known as a **Yellow Pouí** or Yellow Cedar, is native to South America. It is prized for its dramatic bunches of bright yellow flowers.



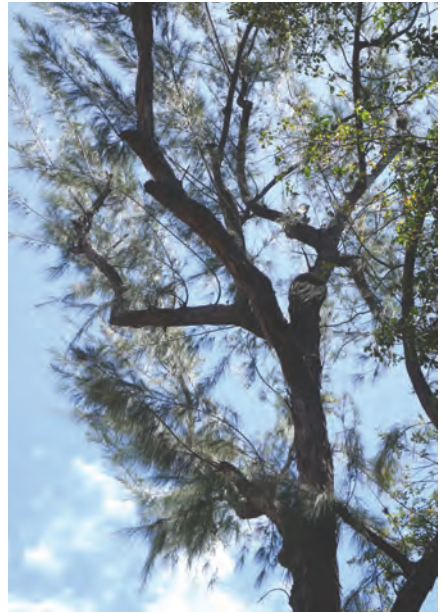




*Tabebuia heterophylla*, **White Cedar** trees are native to the Virgin Islands. The ‘white’ refers to the color of the wood inside. The larger trees were traditionally used for building boats. Their delicate trumpet-shaped flowers range in color from pale to bright pink. This tree attracts hummingbirds and Scaly-naped Pigeons (*Patagioenas squamosa*), like the one in the photo below.



*Other tall, non native trees are found in Cruz Bay Park:*



*Casuarina Equisetifolia* Beach Sheoak

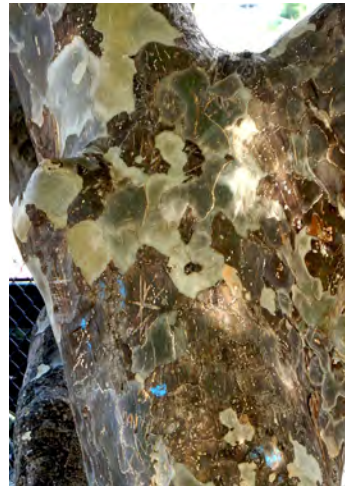
The palms in Cruz Bay Park and near the Tourism Office (photos below and above left) have been variously identified by botanists in the past as *Sabal causiarum* (native to Puerto Rico, Hispaniola and some of the Virgin Islands), *Sabal domingensis* (native to Hispaniola) or *Sabal bermudana* (native to Bermuda, but distributed in cultivation). These species are very similar to one another, and difficult to differentiate.



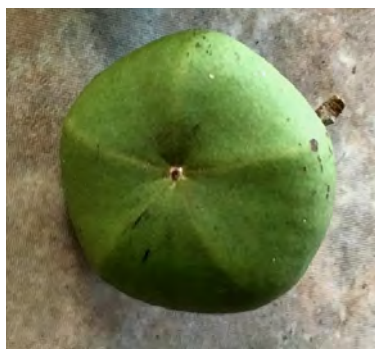
### *D. Tourism Office Area between Cruz Bay Park and the Post Office*



The *Guaiacum officinale*, *Lignum Vitae* or Tree of Life is one of the best-loved trees on St. John due to its beautiful flowers and unusual shiny, patchwork bark. Locals protested successfully to save this tree when a Post Office expansion project called for removing it. Many of the St. John trees were cut in earlier times. The wood is extremely hard and heavy, and contains a lubricating resin that makes it uniquely suitable for bearings used with propeller shafts and mill rollers. It was also used to make treatments for syphilis beginning in the 1500s, hence the common name, which refers to its apparent life-saving properties.



The *Thespesia populnea*, Portia Tree (USDA) is also called **Haiti-haiti** or **Maho** on St. John. These trees can be found on shorelines in various parts of the world, though it is not clear where they are from originally. Many were intentionally planted along St. John beaches to protect against erosion from waves and storm surges. The leaves are heart-shaped, and the yellow flowers turn to pale pink as they dry during the day.



*Non native ornamentals in the Cruz Bay Tourist Center area:*



*Caryota mitis*, Burmese Fishtail Palm



*Dypsis lutescens*, Yellow Butterfly Palm (USDA) or Areca Palm from Madagascar



*Ficus maclellandii* var. *alii*, Banana-leaf Fig.



*Phoenix dactylifera*, Date Palm. Some years ago this tree was spared during a development project a few streets away, and was moved here for safekeeping.

## *E. Post Office Corner to Mongoose Junction Complex*

Leaving the Tourism Office and walking to the street corner next to the Post Office, you can see a tall, distinctive tree that looks like a big Christmas tree. It is an *Araucaria heterophylla*, **Norfolk Island Pine** that came originally from a small island in the South Pacific (not really a pine tree). They have been planted as ornamental trees around St. John and other warm-climate coastal areas.



Going from the Post Office towards Mongoose Junction, by the parking lot under The Lumberyard there is a *Melia azedarach*, Chinaberrytree (USDA) or **Persian Lilac**, a pretty, short-lived tree introduced as an ornamental from Asia.



The *Carica papaya*, **Papaya** further on in the parking lot by the Lumberyard sign is native to Central America. These trees are cultivated for their delicious fruits, which turn yellow on the outside when ripe. They have become naturalized here, as the seeds are spread widely by birds and bats. The leaves and green fruits are reputed to cure many ailments. Because the trunk is soft, with a hollow center, these trees are relatively short-lived, some lasting only a few years.





Along the fence on the dock side is a small *Ceiba pentandra*, **Kapok** or Ceiba tree on the sidewalk near the BVI ferry terminal. These trees are native to South America, and maybe also the Virgin Islands. It is likely that early Amerindians used them to make canoes.

The trees can become extremely large, some with impressive buttress root extensions. When they are young, they have sharp thorns on their trunks, so some people refer to them as Monkey-No-Climb trees. Several other trees with thorns are also sometimes called Monkey-No-Climb, including the Sandbox, White Prickle and Yellow Prickle (see pages 76-77).

The fruit pods are filled with soft fibers, which is why it is also called a Silk Cotton Tree. The fibers were used for bedding, and more recently to stuff life jackets. Bats are attracted to the Kapoks' dangling flowers at night, and because the Taino Indians revered bats as representatives of the spirit world, the Kapok tree also took on special cultural significance for them.



A *Tabebuia heterophylla*,  
**White Cedar** by the end of the  
 fence shows its exuberant pink  
 blossoms in this photo.  
 (See page 13.)



Across the street there is  
 a *Swietenia macrophylla*,  
**Honduras Mahogany**, which  
 has larger leaves than the  
*Swietenia mahagoni*, **West  
 Indian Mahogany**.  
 (See page 12.)





*Next to the ballfield fence there are some ornamental, non native but commonly planted flower bushes.*

**Bougainvillea** plants are native to South America, and named after the French Navy admiral and explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville.



*Nerium oleander*, **Oleander plants**, native to the Mediterranean and Asia, have nice flowers and are widely used for landscaping, but are also very poisonous. (See p. 79.)



## F. *Mongoose Junction*

On the road opposite the entrance to the Mongoose Junction complex, there is a large native *Bucida buceras*, Gregorywood tree (USDA), locally known as a **Gri-gri** or Black Olive. This one has a bench under it where people enjoy the shade while waiting to catch a ride to the beach along the North Shore Road.

These trees can grow over a hundred feet tall and have been a source of valuable timber. The largest one on St. John is across the street from Trunk Bay beach behind the ruins. In colonial times, these were viewed as spirit trees, as reflected in the name Gri-gri, which is associated with West African magic and voodoo. (Nicholls, 2006)



A different type of spirit tree is the *Adonidia merrillii*, **Christmas Palm** in front of the Mongoose Junction building closest to the Post Office. This tree is originally from the Philippines, and got its common name because its red fruit look like Christmas tree ornaments.





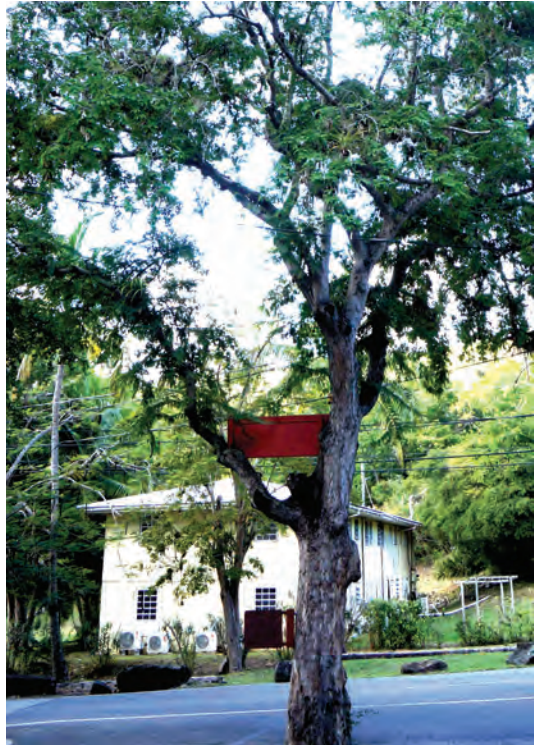
There is a native *Clusia rosea*, Scotch Attorney (USDA) by the R&I Patton shop. It is also locally known as **Pitch Apple** because its seeds are sticky (like pitch). When birds eat the fruit, a seed often drops onto the tree below and stays stuck there until it germinates. The seedling develops aerial roots that can wrap tightly around the host tree, so it is sometimes also thought of as a type of strangler fig. Another name for it is 'Autograph Tree' because people scratch messages into the thick leaves. Early European settlers may have used them for playing cards. (See page 53 for flower.)



The *Swietenia mahagoni*, **West Indian Mahogany** tree by the east side parking lot has a native *Epidendrum ciliare*, Fringed Star Orchid (USDA) growing on it, locally called a **Christmas Orchid**. It also hosts a native *Anthurium crenatum*, Scalloped Laceleaf (USDA) or **Scrub-brush Anthurium** once used to clean pots.



There is a large *Tamarindus indica*, **Tamarind** tree by the entrance to the east side parking lot. This one is probably not too happy about the pavement and the traffic, but has managed to survive. These trees are native to Africa and were probably introduced in the 1500s. There are many larger, more impressive ones around the island, which over many years have provided shade for gatherings of people and cattle, as well as providing timber and tangy fruits.



They were also often used for charcoal production during colonial and post-colonial times – but usually not the whole tree. Many ended up looking twisted and menacing due to having large limbs chopped off or ‘pollarded’ for making charcoal. Their spooky look may have contributed to beliefs that they were inhabited by spirits or ‘jumbies’ that might be harmful to the unwary.





There is a small native *Spondias mombin*, Yellow Mombin (USDA) or **Hog Plum** by the east parking lot near the restaurant. The fruits of these trees are edible and can be used to make refreshing drinks, but are reportedly prone to having worms, so sometimes were fed to the hogs and cattle instead. They are also favorites of fruit bats, which spread the seeds widely. There is a related cultivated species, *Spondias purpurea*, known as Purple Mombin.

An *Andira inermis*, Cabbage Bark tree (USDA) stands tall in the back parking lot around the corner. Locally it is called a **Pig Turd**. This is an inelegant name for an attractive tree that has beautiful purple flowers, but its dried fruits lying on the ground do look remarkably like turds.



## *G. Roundabout Area*

A *Tecoma stans*, Yellow Trumpetbush (USDA) or **Ginger Thomas** tree can be seen on the far edge of the school building near the roundabout. It is native to the West Indies, though probably not to the Virgin Islands, despite being the official territorial flower of the US Virgin Islands. It is valued for its bright trumpet-shaped yellow flowers.



In the schoolyard, there is a *Calotropis procera*, Rooster Tree (USDA), also known as **Cow Heel** or **Apple of Sodom**. It is a type of milkweed native to Africa and Asia that is poisonous to livestock. It can often be seen along roadsides in St. John.



**Bananas**, originally from Asia, have been planted on the edge of the school yard closest to the roundabout.



### *H. Road from Roundabout Area to Tennis Courts*

There is a big old Genip on the roundabout, next to the pink building.

On the other side of the pink building is a *Moringa oleifera*, **Horseradish Tree** or **Moringa**, which is originally from Asia but widely cultivated and possibly naturalized on St. John. All parts of the tree are edible and nutritious. It was originally planted as livestock feed.



Photo Kathy Guidi



There is a very large non-native ficus tree by the Fire Station, which is probably a *Ficus microcarpa*.

## I. By the Tennis Courts



The palm tree across from the water pump is a *Sabal palmetto*, Cabbage Palm.



White Cedar (See p. 13.)

A native *Crescentia linearifolia*, Higuierito (USDA) or **Narrow-leaf Calabash** tree by the stop sign is a small tree with whip-like branches. Around the island you can also see cultivated and somewhat naturalized Common Calabash trees, *Crescentia cujete*. Their dried fruits can be cut and used to make cups, bowls or handicrafts.





*Across from the parking lot:*



The *Morinda citrifolia*, Indian Mulberry (USDA) is originally from Asia, but now naturalized. Locally it is called **Painkiller Tree**, because it was introduced for its many medicinal uses, including relief of muscle pains and headaches. Some people also know it by its Hawaiian name Noni, or as Starvation Fruit (maybe because the fruit is smelly and only likely to be eaten when nothing else is available, or because it can be a valuable resource during hard times).



Sea Grape with a *Thrinax radiata*, Florida Thatch Palm



Another nearby Sea Grape with a *Sabal palmetto*, Cabbage Palm

## *J. Road to Frank Bay, Shoreline and Pond*

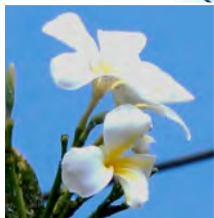
Along the road away from Wharfside Village, old Genips grow in the graveyard.



The *Yucca aloifolia*, **Spanish Bayonet** by the far end of the Gallows Point resort is from Mexico originally.



The **Frangipani** trees on the hill across the street are *Plumeria rubra*, Temple Trees (USDA). The native Frangipani with thinner leaves is *Plumeria alba*, Nosegay Tree (USDA). (See p.10.)



*Along the shoreline of Frank Bay there is a beach sweeping Sea Grape and a tall Haiti haitil/Maho tree. Beyond them along the beach:*

A non-native *Cryptostegia madagascariensis*, **Madagascar Rubbervine** with attractive purple flowers can be seen growing over a thorny native *Vachellia macracantha*, **Porknut** (USDA), more commonly referred to locally as a type of **Casha**.



Another Casha with smaller leaves and thorns grows across the street near the pond lookout entrance, below.



A *Cassia fistula*, **Golden Shower** by the fence at the far end of the beach is native to India, and is known for its showy, hanging yellow flowers.



## Mangroves

In addition to the **Red Mangrove** trees by the Battery (see p. 9) there are several other types of related trees on St. John.



*Laguncularia racemosa*, **White Mangrove** trees grow by the Frank Bay pond lookout platform, providing spaces for birds to hunt and rest. These trees can also be seen at Francis Bay along the wooden boardwalk by the pond, where many birds come.



The *Conocarpus erectus*, Button Mangrove (USDA) or **Buttonwood** by the Frank Bay pond lookout platform is easily identifiable by its clusters of small cones like brown buttons. (However, there is apparently now some question about whether this tree should be properly called a mangrove.)



It generally grows on shorelines, and can also be seen on the Annaberg shoreline across from the parking lot.

Another important species is *Avicennia germinans*, Black Mangrove. There are not many near Cruz Bay, but a few can be seen by the boat ramp on Lind Point.



An easier place to find them is near the corner where you turn to go to the Annaberg ruins to the right of the stop sign in photo below. Look on the ground under the tree for distinctive thin, finger-like pneumatophores that help the tree breathe in water-logged soil.



At Frank Bay pond near the lookout platform you can also see native *Bontia daphnoides*, White Alling trees (USDA) or Wild Olive. These trees are locally called **Bastard Mangroves** because they often grow along the coast near stands of mangroves.



## PART 2

# *Local Trees and Plants by Distinguishing Characteristics*

### Explanatory Notes – Gail Karlsson

Although trees and plants help to define our sense of place and geography, for many people it is challenging to differentiate unfamiliar species. Focusing on distinctive flowers, fruits, or thorns turned out to be a useful starting point for people just beginning to pay attention to trees, even though the eye-catching flower or fruit might not actually be that tree's most important characteristic.

Once a tree was identified, we tried to find out if it was native, and if not, whether it had over time become naturalized (now reproducing in the wild) and/or a nuisance (for example, by crowding out valuable native plants).

Then we began to gather current and historical information about how certain trees and plants were used. In earlier times, people relied on the forests as their primary sources for food, building supplies and medicines. At the same time, trees also played important roles in people's spiritual lives, cosmologies, and cultural practices. In some cases, this is reflected in the local names for plants or trees thought to be associated with spirits known as 'jumbies'.

On the practical side, many of the larger hardwood trees originally growing on St. John were cut down to build boats, houses, and furniture and are rarely seen now. New species were planted for food and fodder, or sometime just because of their beauty. Others served as fences, protected watersheds, and prevented erosion.

There were also many trees and plants used for medicinal purposes. We noted a few of the most well-known ones, but did not make a serious attempt to catalogue them. Interestingly, it seems that plants that are potentially poisonous are also in many cases the ones used for medicines, due to their bioactive properties.

Learning about trees served as a lens through which to consider the meaning of the Unitarian Universalist principle of respect for the interconnected web of all existence—deepening our recognition of the degree to which people's lives have been shaped by dependence on trees and plants, as well as the impacts we have on the landscapes we inhabit.

We also began to pay more attention to broader ecological factors, such as the inter-relationships between plants and wildlife. Many flowers need bees, birds, bats and other creatures for pollination and seed dispersal, and therefore co-evolve within a tightly woven pattern of reciprocity. For example, flowers that open at night are meant to attract bats or moths, rather than the bees and birds active during the day, and use different colors and scents depending on their pollinators.

Observing the intricacies of these networks of relationships allows us to understand more clearly what we need to do in order to protect and preserve the complex natural world that supports and sustains us.

*The trees and plants introduced in this section are native to the Virgin Islands unless otherwise stated. The ones in boxes refer to species introduced earlier in the book, and are not all native.*

## A. Flowers

### *White Flowers*

*Senegalia muricata*, Spineless Wattle (USDA) locally known as **Amarat** is a hardwood that is resistant to rot and termites, so it was frequently used to make posts for building houses. More recently, it has often been cut down because its leaves look a lot like those of the unappreciated non-native *Leucaena leucocephala*, White Lead Tree (USDA), known in St. John as Tan-tan. The flowers are different though. See p. 47.

Amarat leaf



Tan-tan leaf



### *Adansonia digitata*, **Baobab**

This is viewed as a spirit tree, whose seeds were probably brought to the Caribbean from Africa. There is only one mature specimen on St. John. This is a very large, long-lived tree that has an unusual bottle-shaped trunk with no low branches. The bark is gray and spongy, and holds water. It looks a bit like elephant skin. The impressive flowers open at night, and the large hanging fruit is furry on the outside, leading some people to call it the dead rat tree. The mature one on St. John produces flowers, but does not seem to bear fruit.



Photo Cheryl Magdaleno

The leaves of the *Pimenta racemosa*, **Bay Rum tree** contain oil that gives them a wonderful smell when they are crushed. These native trees were cultivated on St. John for many years in the late 1800s and early 1900s to make a well-known after shave lotion. There is still some produced on St. Thomas, though the oil mostly comes from Dominica. A lovely grove of these trees and the remains of a distillery can be seen on the loop trail across from Cinnamon Bay. The bark of the trees looks like cinnamon sticks.



*Euphorbia petiolaris*, Manchineel Berry (USDA) or **Black Manchineel** has dark purplish bark like a cherry tree, round leaves and sweet little flowers. It has caustic sap, though, and is related to the deadly *Hippomane mancinella* or Manchineel tree (see pages 66 and 78), as its name indicates.



*Pithecellobium unguis-cati*, Catclaw or Blackbead (USDA) locally known as **Bread-and-Cheese** gets its name from its distinctive seeds, which are supposedly reminiscent of Danish black bread with orange cheese. However, its Latin name refers to its thorns, which scratch like cat's claws.





A. FLOWERS



*Solanum polygamum*, **Cakalaka Berry** is a common small tree in the Nightshade family, with white flowers and reddish orange fruits.



It has a relative, *Solanum bahamense*, **Canker Berry**, which is a short-lived shrub with smaller fruits.



*Cordia alliodora*, Spanish Elm (USDA) or **Capa** is a tall tree that was used for timber and construction. It is most noticeable when it produces large clumps of white flowers.



## *Capers*

There are a number of native trees from this family on St. John, with similar-looking flowers. However, their flowers are bitter and do not produce the type of buds that are pickled in the Mediterranean to make the capers that people eat.

*Quadrella indica*, Linguam (USDA) or **White Caper** is a common, small evergreen tree with showy white flowers and seed pods that are bright red inside.



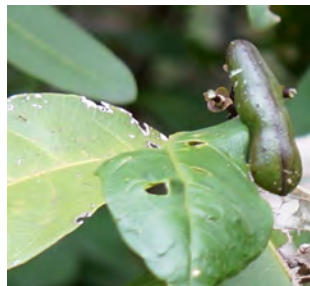
*Quadrella cynophallophora*, Jamaican Caper (USDA) is also called **Black Caper**. This name refers to the darkness of the leaves and the trunk of the tree, not its flower, which is similar to the White Caper flower but turns purple in the evening.



*Cynophalla flexuosa*, False Teeth (USDA) or **Limber Caper** is more vine-like than the White and Black Capers, and the leaves on different Limber Capers are often dissimilar in shape – some much smaller and thinner so you wouldn't think it is the same species. It is the host for Great Southern White butterflies, which lay their eggs on the tree. When they hatch, the caterpillars eat the leaves.



*Cynophalla hastata*, Broadleaf Caper (USDA) or **Leather Leaf** is similar to a Limber Caper in its droopiness, but is more of a tree. Its flowers have a pink tinge.



*Cappariadastrum baducca*, Caper (USDA) or **Rat Bean** is a woody shrub with larger, softer leaves and fatter pods that turn dark brown.

*Senegalia westiana*, **Catch and Keep** is a woody, very thorny vine with thick stems. It creates impenetrable thickets, and in the past was intentionally planted for fencing. The leaves and stems have rows of small curved thorns that seem to reach out and grab people walking by. It is difficult to escape without bloody scratches.



Chinaberry or Persian Lilac  
(See p. 18)



Christmas Orchid  
(See p. 23)



Frangipani (See p. 10)



Genip (See p. 7)

A. FLOWERS



*Citharexylum spinosum*, Spiny Fiddlewood (USDA) or **Fiddlewood** has long pointed leaves, unusual stringy bark, and bunches of small red and black fruits, attractive to birds like this Pearly-eyed Thrasher. As the tree's name indicates, its wood was used to make musical instruments.



*Trichostigma octandra*, **Hoop Vine** is very smooth and strong, and was used on St. John to weave well-crafted baskets and fish pots – which is now pretty much a lost art.



*Randia aculeata*, Wild Indigoberry (USDA) or **Inkberry** is a small tree with long slender branches covered with clusters of dark leaves. This was traditionally used as a Christmas tree in the Virgin Islands – the small thorns help hold on the ornaments. The white berries don't seem very appealing for eating, but apparently their pulp was used to make blue ink or dye.



Horseradish / Moringa  
(See p. 27)



Indian Almond  
(See p. 6)

**A. FLOWERS**

*Casearia decandra*, Wild Honeytree (USDA) or **Jumbie Apple** is a good source of nectar for bees. It has small orange almost-tasteless fruits.



The flowers of *Brunfelsia americana*, American Brunfelsia (USDA) or **Lady of the Night** are fragrant only at night, to attract moths. It has tubular white flowers that fade with age to yellow, and small orange fruit.



*Sansevieria trifasciata*, Viper's Bowstring Hemp (USDA) is locally known as **Mother-in-law's Tongue** or Snake Plant. It is a thick, sturdy plant, with strong fibers that were used to make rope. It is not native, but has spread widely. In some places it has become a nuisance, crowding out other plants.

*Bourreria succulenta*, Body Wood (USDA) or **Pigeon Berry** has fruit that is popular with birds, but not eaten by people.



*Nectandra coriacea*, Lancewood (USDA) or **Pepper Cillament** is a small evergreen tree with shiny leaves, white flowers and dark fruit.



*Plumbago scandens*, Doctorbush (USDA) or **Plumbago** is a small, thin vine-like plant with seeds that hook onto passers-by. Its white flowers are generally pollinated by butterflies. A cultivated, introduced species has blue flowers.





A. FLOWERS



*Cordia collococca*, **Red Manjack** is a large tree with clusters of small white flowers, rough leaves, and orange-red fruits.



*Inga laurina*, **Sacky Sac Bean** has showy white flowers hanging in long spikes. The bean is filled with sweet pulp.



*Ditaxis fasciculata*, **Broom Silverbush** (USDA) or **Silverbush** is a thicket-like shrub with solitary white flowers.



Sea Grape (See p. 5)

*Hylocereus trigonus*, Strawberry Pear (USDA) or **Snake Cactus** is a native, night-blooming cactus.



*Tarenaya spinosa* or **Spiny Spider Flower** is a small herb that grows mostly in moist disturbed areas.



*Ginoria rohrii*, locally known as **Sugar Ant** or Bastard Gri-gri, is a small coastal or wetland tree with thin branches that are briefly covered with white flowers in the spring after a heavy rain.



## A. FLOWERS



*Leucaena leucocephala*, White Lead Tree (USDA), is called **Tan-tan** or Wild Tamarind on St. John. It was introduced as a durable and fast-growing source of fodder for cattle – but not for horses or donkeys because it makes their hair fall out. It now grows wherever there is disturbed land, and is viewed as a nuisance, though it does have some benefits, as its roots hold the soil and prevent erosion.



*Amyris elemifera*, Sea Torchwood (USDA) or **Torchwood**, is a small, dark tree with white flowers and groups of three leaflets. It produces a resin that makes it flammable even when green.



*Cecropia schreberiana*, Pumpwood (USDA) or the **Trumpet Tree** has a hollow trunk, and was used to make rafts and floats as well as musical instruments. Bats enjoy its tiny fruits, and spread the seeds.

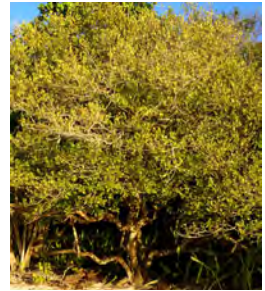
Photo Suki Dickson Buchalter

## Yellow Flowers

*Aloe vera*, Barbados Aloe (USDA) or **Aloe** is not native, but was cultivated for medicinal uses and can be seen growing around the island in places where it was once planted. It is especially useful for treating sunburns and digestive problems.



*Elaeodendron xylocarpum*, Marble Tree (USDA), is known locally as **Cassine** or **Nothing Nut**. It is mostly found on shorelines, and its round, greenish-yellow fruit is generally eaten only by bats.



*Agave missionum*, Corita (USDA) or **Century Plant** is found only in the northern Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico. Few are left now because of an influx of Agave Snout Weevils arriving on imported garden plants. These plants actually take about 15-25 years to bloom, not a century. When they do, it is impressive. A tall stalk like a huge asparagus shoots up in spring with bright yellow flowers loved by birds, bees and bats. Later in the year, the dried woody stalks with their knobby pods are still standing. They were used by some recent settlers as alternative Christmas trees.



**A. FLOWERS**

*Tolumnia prionochoila*, **Tropical Dancing Lady Orchid** (USDA), is a small, dangling air plant that grows only in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Its bright yellow flowers are shaped like dancers with full skirts fanned out around them. The related *Tolumnia variegata*, **Harlequin Dancing Lady Orchid** (USDA), with similar white flowers, is widespread in the Virgin Islands but also grows in other places.



Ginger Thomas (See p. 26)



Golden Shower (See p. 31)



Haiti-haiti/Maho (See p. 16)

*Merremia umbellata*, **Hog Vine** is a common creeper with yellow flowers and a cluster of small brown seed pods.



*Momordica charantia*, Balsam Pear (USDA) is locally called **Maiden Apple** or Lizard Food. It is a naturalized vine with a dramatic looking fruit. Anolis lizards like to eat the red pulp surrounding the seeds.

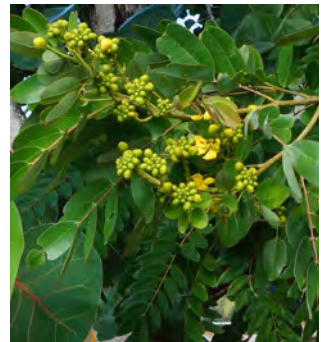


Photo by Leeanne DiGiacomo



*Croton flavens* var. *rigidus*, Yellow Balsam (USDA) or **Maran** is a shrub with hairy leaves, once used to clean pots. Its scent is thought to keep away sand flies. Goats and other livestock will not eat it, so it tends to become dominant in grazed areas. Ground doves eat its seeds.

Photos Suki Dickson Buchalter



*Senna bicapsularis*, Christmas Bush (USDA) or **Money Bush** has bright golden flowers and long seed pods. It is related to the non-native *Senna siamea* by the National Park Visitors Center playground in Cruz Bay (photo above on the right).

A. FLOWERS



*Byrsonima spicata*, Doncella (USDA) or **Spoonberry** is a tall tree that grows in the mountains. When it blooms, its yellow flowers stick straight up.

*Photo Joan Wilson*



*Sophora tomentosa*, **Yellow Necklace Pod** is a rare native planted near the National Park Visitors Center entrance. Its fruit looks like a string of beads.



*Stigmaphyllon emarginatum*, Monarch Amazonvine (USDA) is locally known as **Yellow Wiss** or Leatherleaf. It is a common woody vine with bright, five-petaled flowers.



Yellow Pouí (See p. 12)

## *Pinkish Purple Flowers*

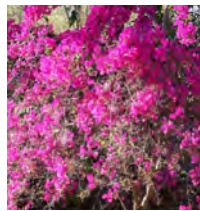


*Piscida carthagenensis*, Stinkwood (USDA),  
**Caribbean Dogwood** or Fish Poison

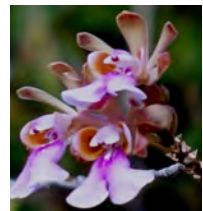
This tree becomes conspicuous when it drops its leaves and clumps of pea-like pink blossoms appear. Along with the flowers there are clusters of unusual seed pods that start out green and later turn brown as they dry out. It is called 'fish poison' because the Amerindians used it to stun fish for easy harvesting.



Banana (See p. 26)

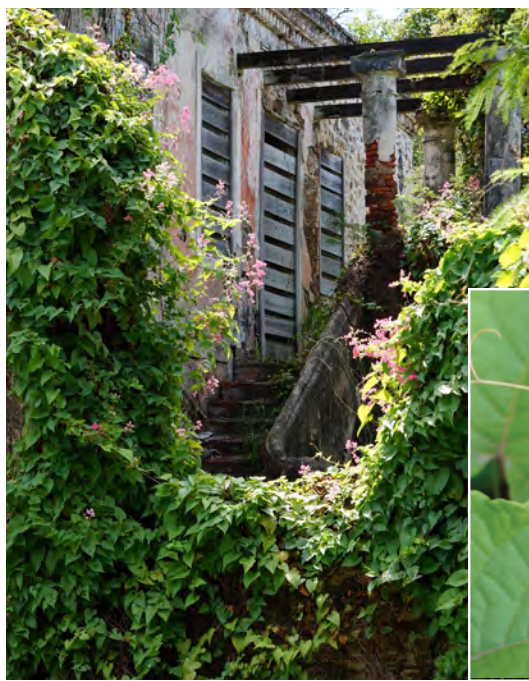


Bougainvillea (See p. 21)

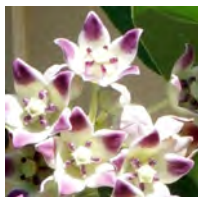


Butterfly Orchid (See p. 10)





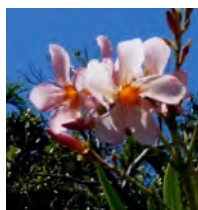
*Antigonon leptopus*, **Coral Vine** is native to Mexico and Central America. It was brought in as an attractive garden plant and has now become naturalized in the Virgin Islands – pervasive in some areas.



Cow Heel (See p. 26)



Love Bush (See p. 11)



Oleander (See p. 21)



Pitch Apple (See p. 23)

*Annona glabra*, **Pond Apple** is found near mangroves and along guts. Its fruit is reported to be unpalatable.



*Samanea saman*, **Rain Tree** or Saman is a very large tree with a broad crown that is native to Mexico and South America. It was introduced in the Virgin Islands for its shade and its seed pods, which taste like licorice - cattle enjoyed both. There are various theories about the name Rain Tree; one explanation is that its leaves curl up at night and as they uncurl in the morning they sometimes drop the rain that fell during the night.





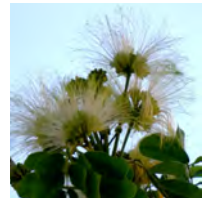
*Bromelia pinguin*, Pinguin (USDA) or **Wild Pineapple** was used for fencing because it makes a dense thorny thicket. The cup formed by the growth of its sword-like leaves catches water for lizards, frogs and birds. The fruit is edible but very acidic.



Tamarind (See p. 24)



White Cedar (See p. 13)



Woman's Tongue (See p. 6)

*Orange flowers*

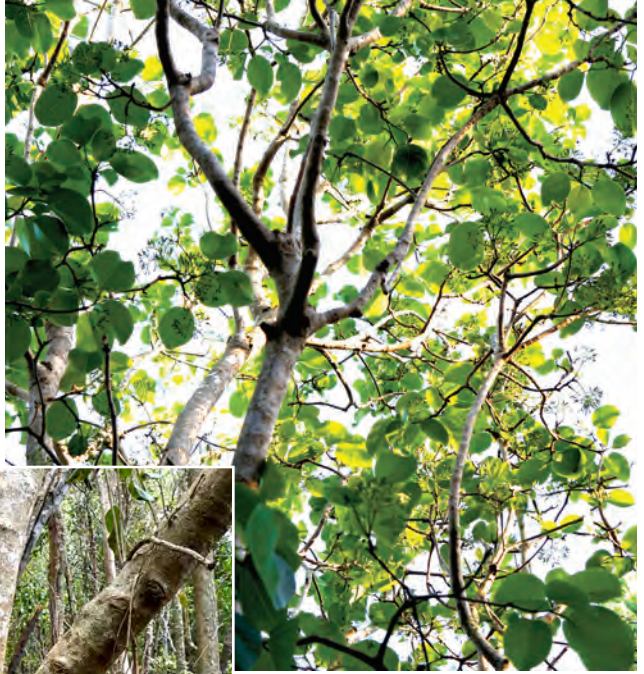


*Cordia rickseckeri*, San Bartolome (USDA) or **Orange Manjack** trees grow only in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. The closely related *Cordia sebestena* has similar flowers but white fruits. (The bird in the tree above is a Bananaquit.)



Flamboyant (See p. 7)

*Green flowers*



*Pisonia subcordata*, **Water Mampoo** is a large dramatic-looking tree. It has light-colored, spongy bark and sometimes splits off into multiple thick trunks. The young flower clusters look like tiny broccoli heads, and on female trees the circular clumps of green fruits turn dark and very sticky.



Narrow-leaf Calabash  
(See p. 28)

## *Blue/Purple flowers*

*Piptocoma antillana*, **Antilles Velvet-shrub** is a small plant with blue brush-like flowers.



*Bignonia aequinoctialis*, **Guard Withe** or **Wiss**, is a rare coastal vine with lavender flowers found mostly near mangrove wetlands, including by Fish Bay.



*Lepidaploa sericea*, **Longshoot** is a common shrub.



Lignum Vitae (See p. 15)





*Bauhinia variegata*, Mountain Ebony (USDA) is a cultivated tree from south Asia with lovely purple flowers and distinctive deeply-lobed leaves. This and several other related varieties (some with white flowers) are all referred to on St. John as **Poor Man's Orchid**.



*Petrea volubilis*, Queen's Wreath (USDA) or **Purple Wreath** is cultivated for its flowers. It is native to the southern Caribbean, Central America and northern South America, but not the Virgin Islands .



*Oplonia spinosa*, **Prickly Bush** is a shrub with spiny branches and bluish flowers.



*Talinum fruticosum*, Ceylon Spinach (USDA) or **Water Leaf** is a small native plant often found along the roadside. In some places where it grows, people eat the leaves raw like spinach. Its flowers can also be yellow, and flowers of both colors can often be found together.



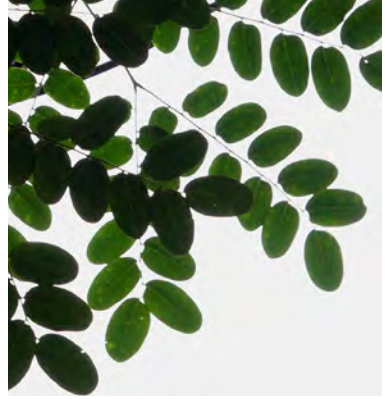
When *Poitea florida*, **Wattapama** trees flower in the spring, usually after a heavy rain, it is a cause for celebration on St. John. Lavender blossoms suddenly burst out along the long thin branches, but sadly they usually only last a short time.



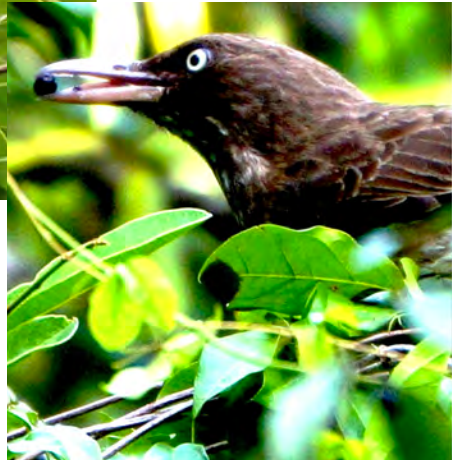


## B. Seeds, Fruits and Berries

*Adenanthera pavonia*, the **Bead Tree** was introduced from Asia and is now naturalized. The red beads are used for necklaces and crafts. It is sometimes locally called Jumbie Bead, but should not be confused with *Abrus precatorius*, which has red seeds with black spots on them, and is poisonous. See page 65.



*Eugenia biflora*, Black Rodwood (USDA) or **Birchberry** is a small tree that is a favorite of birds, including the Pearly-eyed Thrasher shown here. There are many related trees on St. John, including *Eugenia procera*, *Eugenia pseudopsidium*, and *Eugenia ligustrina*.



*Jatropha gossypifolia*, **Bellyache Bush** is a small shrub with leaves that are maroon when young, small dark red flowers, and 3-ribbed green fruits. It is often found in coastal areas, and especially persists when goats and donkeys over-browse since it is unpalatable to them. The leaves and fruits are toxic, but are used in many home remedies for skin problems.



*Guettarda odorata*, Cucubano de Vieques (USDA) or **Black Berry** has small white flowers and dark velvety fruits popular with Bridled Quail Doves like the one shown here.

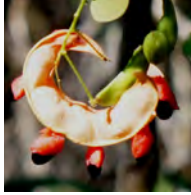


*Guapira fragrans*, **Black Mampoo** is a large, common tree that produces small, branched fruit in clusters that turn from green to shiny black.



Jack Spaniard or Paper Wasp nest in Black Mampoo tree (above right).

B. SEEDS, FRUITS AND BERRIES



Bread-and-Cheese  
(See p. 36)



Calabash (See p. 28)



Canker Berry (See p. 37)



Cassine (See p. 48)



Photo Cheryl Magdaleno

*Anacardium occidentale*, **Cashew** trees were introduced from South America, possibly by the Tainos. They were planted for food, and the oil from the seeds was also used for medicinal purposes and as a lubricant. The sap and fruit are caustic, and the nuts have to be roasted before consumption.



*Ricinus communis*, **Castor Bean** was originally from Africa but was transported widely and cultivated for medicinal purposes (as a laxative and emetic). It is still used that way today. The Caribs reportedly also used the oil for their body paint, and as a hair dressing (Honychurch, 1980). The plant is also the source of the poison ricin, which causes nerve damage and death.

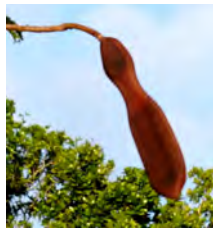
*Coccoloba venosa*, **False Chigger Grape** is a roadside shrub with a spike of white flowers. Related to the Sea Grape, it produces a string of small sugary fruits that turn from white to red.



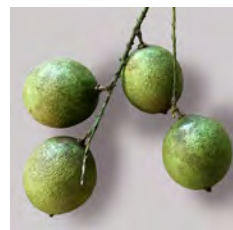
*Guettarda scabra*, Wild Guave (USDA) or **Greenheart** has bark similar to that of the Guavaberry, but which is flaky rather than smooth. It is not related to *Chlorocardium rodiei*, a tropical hardwood from South America used commercially for construction, and also called greenheart.



Fiddlewood (See p. 41)



Flamboyant (See p. 7)



Genip (See p. 7)

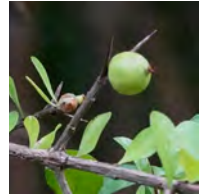
*Myrciaria floribunda*, **Guavaberry** has smooth, mottled bark and small fruits that are traditionally used to make jams, wine and liqueurs, especially around Christmas time.



Hog Plum (See p. 25)



Indian Almond (See p. 6)



Inkberry (See p. 42)



The **Jumbie Bead vine** (*Abrus precatorius*) has red seeds with black spots, sometimes called crab's eyes, that are used for jewelry and crafts. They contain the deadly poison abrine, so should not be chewed on. The seeds are smaller than those from the Bead Tree (See p. 61.)



**Jumbie Pepper** or **Cat's Blood** (*Rivina humilis*) is a common, small bush. Its leaves have been used in medicinal teas, though the berries may be toxic.



Mahogany (See p. 12)



Maiden Apple (See p. 50)



Mango (See p. 8)



*Hippomane mancinella*, **Manchineel** is found along shorelines and is so poisonous that its deceptively sweet fruits are called 'death apples'. The sap is also very poisonous. If you stand under the tree while it is raining, the water dripping off it can give you a rash. (See p. 78.)



*Ardisia obovata*, Guadeloupe **Marlberry** has flowers that stick straight up and thin bunches of fruit that turn dark purple when they are ripe.



*Matelea maritima*, Beach **Milk Vine** has a weird fruit with spine-like projections on the outside and white latex inside.

**B. SEEDS, FRUITS AND BERRIES**



*Daphnopsis americana*, Burn Nose (USDA) or **Mountain Maho** has round white berries. 'Maho' is an Amerindian word referring to bark that could be stripped off to make ropes.

*Passiflora edulis*, Purple Granadilla (USDA) is a cultivated type of **Passionfruit** that sometimes escapes and grows wild. There are also several native species on St. John, including *Passiflora foetida* and *laurifolia*.



Papaya (See p. 18)



Pig Turd (See p. 25)



Pigeon Berry (See p. 44)

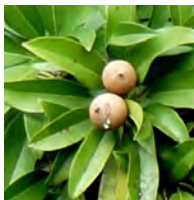


Pitch Apple (See p. 23)



Pond Apple (See p. 54)

*Morisonia americana*, **Rat Apple** is a small, droopy tree with round brown fruits about the size of ping pong balls. The dry white fruit inside is said to be edible, but is not very attractive to humans. It is related to the Black Caper.



Sapodilla/Mesple (See p. 9)



Sea Grape (See p. 5)

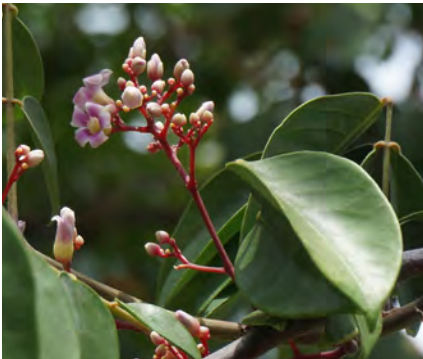


## B. SEEDS, FRUITS AND BERRIES

*Annona muricata*, **Soursop** is a delicious sweet/tart fruit often used to make flavorful drinks. It was probably brought to the Virgin Islands by the Tainos, and is frequently planted in local gardens. A tea made from its leaves is used to help induce sleep, and for other medicinal purposes.



*Averrhoa carambola*, Carambola (USDA) or **Star Fruit** is native to Asia but has been widely planted. The fruit is yellow when ripe, and has a star shape when cut crosswise.



*Hymenaea courbaril*, **Stinking Toe** or **West Indian Locust** has large brown pods with sweet dry pulp inside surrounding the seeds. Amerindians made canoes by stripping off its bark in one piece and sewing up the ends. The tree also produced balls of resin that were used for waterproofing, as well as incense and medicines.



*Annona squamosa*, **Sugar Apple** is related to Soursop, and is similarly delicious, though more sugary and less tart. It is a challenge to pick them before the birds and bats get to them. The fruit is ripe when the sections pull away from each other and there is whitish/yellowish space between them.



Tamarind (See p. 24)



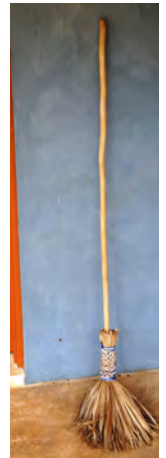
*Triphasia trifolia*, Limeberry (USDA) or **Sweet Lime** is not much good for eating but is an attractive dark green bush that makes a hedge. It has become naturalized after cultivation because birds like the fruits, and now is viewed as encroaching on native species.



*Bursera simaruba*, Gumbo Limbo (USDA) or **Turpentine** tree has a gummy resin that does smell a bit like turpentine and is sometimes used for healing wounds or keeping bugs away. This is also called the tourist tree because of its red, peeling bark. Its fruit is a good source of food for birds but not for people.



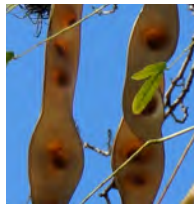
*Coccothrinax barbadensis*, **Tyre** or **Teyer Palm**, is the most commonly seen native palm. It grows in many areas on St. John but is most visible standing up tall at high elevations. Its dark fruit was used for fabric dye, and the fronds were made into hats, brooms and thatching for roofs.



*Famea occidentalis*, False Coffee (USDA) or **Wild Coffee** is a small tree with dark leaves and purple/black berries. Birds, but not people, eat the berries, and it is not actually used to make coffee. The wood is hard and has been made into fence posts and tool handles.



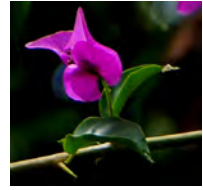
*Casearia guianensis*, Guyanese Wild Coffee (USDA) or **Wild Coffee** is another native plant that is not related to coffee except in the appearance of its berries. Its flexible stems and sticks were used for construction of traditional mud and wattle houses.



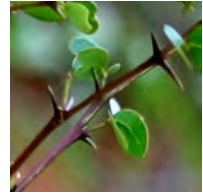
Woman's Tongue (See p. 6)

### C. Trees and Plants with Thorns and Spines

*Adelia ricinella*, Wild Lime (USDA) or **Adelia** is a small, spiny tree that goats won't eat, so it spreads in areas where they have grazed.



Bougainvillea (See p. 21)



Bread-and-Cheese  
(See p. 36)



Casha (See p. 31)



Catch and Keep (See p. 40)

## Cactus



*Selenicereus grandiflorus*, Queen of the Night, above left (see page 11). The *Hylocereus undatus*, Night Blooming Cactus (USDA) on the right has a curvy edge.

*Nopalea cochenillifera*, Cochineal Nopal Cactus (USDA) or **Paddle Cactus** has red flowers and fruit. It is widespread but not native. The paddles can be sliced up into green bean shaped pieces and cooked as a vegetable.



*Pilosocereus royenii*, Royen's Tree Cactus (USDA) or **Pipe Organ** is one of the largest and most commonly seen cacti on St. John. *Photo by Kathleen Starrs*

C. THORNS AND SPINES

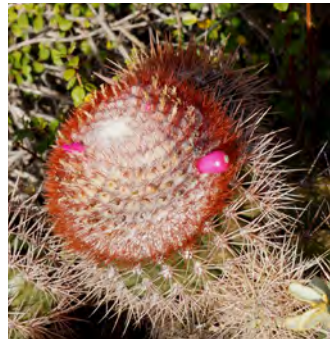
The Pipe Organ cactus (see previous page) has white hairs around its flowers, and small edible fruits. Bananaquit birds like to make nests in these trees.



*Consouea rubescens*, Sour Prickly Pear (USDA) or **Tree Cactus** has a single trunk with spines. Birds nest in these also, and eat their fruit.



*Melocactus intortus*, **Turk's Cap** grows in colonies in rocky coastal areas, especially by Ram's Head. It has pink flowers and small, tasty bright pink fruits.





*Hura crepitans*, **Sandbox** or Monkey Pistol is a tall, thorny tree that grows in moist areas. It has a very interesting seed pod shaped like a green tangerine, which turns brown and woody then explodes suddenly and loudly, spraying out its seeds. The dried pods were popular in colonial days as a writing desk accessory that held sand used to blot the ink. Its sap is caustic and irritating.



Kapok (See p. 19.)



C. THORNS AND SPINES



*Zanthoxylum martinicense* White Prickly Ash (USDA) or **White Prickle** is a tall tree, common in many areas of St. John, that is related to orange trees. Its bark is gray or sometimes reddish.



*Zanthoxylum monophyllum*, **Yellow Prickle** is smaller than the White Prickle and has lumpier thorns, though with sharp points. It has a citrus scent, and its bark was used to make a yellow dye.



Wild Pineapple (See p. 55)

## *D. Dangerous Trees and Plants*

*Ricinus communis*, **Castor Bean** (See p. 63)  
The seeds are poisonous if chewed, as they contain the toxin ricin.



*Comocladia dodonaea*, **Poison Ash (USDA) or Christmas Bush**  
Contact with this plant causes serious skin irritation that can last for weeks.

*Abrus precatorius*, **Jumbie Bead** (See p. 65)  
Eating the seeds or putting them in your mouth can cause serious illness or death.



*Hippomane mancinella*, **Manchineel** (See p. 66)  
Eating the fruit can cause serious illness or death. The sap is also poisonous, and can cause skin and eye problems on contact, even if rainwater just drips down on someone standing under the tree.





*Euphorbia tirucalli*, **Pencil Tree** (See p.11)  
The milky sap of this succulent is a skin and eye irritant.



*Nerium oleander*, **Oleander** (See p. 21)  
The flowers, leaves and stems are all poisonous if ingested. Water with Oleander leaves in it reportedly can kill a horse that drinks it.



*Andira inermis*, **Pig Turd** (See p. 25)  
The bark and seeds contain poisonous alkaloids berberine and andirine, which can cause skin irritation, and death if ingested.



*Hura crepitans*, **Sandbox** (See p. 76)  
The fruit causes vomiting, and the sap was used to kill fish and make arrow poison. It also causes skin rashes and eye damage.



*Tragia volubilis*, **Fireman (USDA) or Stinging Nettle**  
When you brush against the leaves and stems of this plant, you get a painful burning sensation. Fortunately it usually stops hurting after a while, unless you have an allergic reaction. (It is not related to *Urtica dioica*, which is called 'stinging nettle' in other places.)

## *Celebration of St. John Trees*

Suki Dickson Buchalter

Trees, trees, trees are everywhere we look here on St. John. About two-thirds of the island is National Park, and they have been allowed to grow freely there. Only where there has been development do we see a lot of clear cutting. As wordless witnesses to all of man's machinations, trees stand as silent sentinels, sending their roots down into the earth, gathering nourishment. Their branches extend up into the heavens where they welcome the sun, the rain, the wind and the birds in their branches.



Our trees mark the seasons and the wheel of the year. In the summer and fall, many trees drop their leaves, and go dormant until a storm brings rain. If a hurricane wind blows in August or September, trees can be stripped of all their leaves and small branches, only to come back stronger with re-growth. If the tree is knocked completely to the ground, it may continue to grow at a new angle. In winter, the trees seem to be biding their time waiting for the spring rain. Then every species takes its turn at flowering, then fruiting or putting out nuts and seed pods.

I have always loved certain trees on St. John, but through the UUF Tree Project I have come to truly appreciate the many varieties here. Spring of 2016 has been delightfully wet and rainy, as compared to our devastating drought of 2015. That was such a dry year that I do not believe the trees had enough moisture to send out all their flowers, so they seem to have produced more this year. (Many of our indigenous trees are able to survive droughts, which makes them a good choice for landscaping.)

I learned recently from Eleanor Gibney, one of the project's expert advisers, that although some trees on St. John are small, they may actually be hundreds of years old. Living in this extreme environment, the trees grow slowly. They also resist hurricane force winds by staying close to the hillsides.

The tall, indigenous Tyre Palm outside my window has been there since we cleared a space for our home in 1984. It has been the highlight of many scenic photos of our view towards Coral Bay, taken by friends, family and visitors. It is about 40 or 50 feet high, and in the past 32 years it has only grown a few inches. I think it must be at least 150 years old. After two extreme hurricanes (Hugo and Marilyn) I never saw one Tyre Palm that was lost.

People everywhere have honored trees for their beauty, flowers, fruits and nuts, healing leaves, bark, roots and especially for the shade they afford from the sun. The indigenous people of Central and South America, as well African cultures, also venerated certain trees as symbols of the cosmos, mediators between human society and the spiritual realm, and dwelling places for ancestors.

Above: Suki with the Lignum Vitae tree by the Post Office

In the book *Remarkable Big Trees in the Virgin Islands*, Robert W. Nichols identified a group of trees here as 'spirit trees'. One of our best-known native spirit trees is the Lignum Vitae (*Guaiacum officinale*). There is one next to the Cruz Bay Post Office that provides a perfect, shady place for people to meet, talk, and discuss life. Churchgoers sit under another of these trees next to the Lutheran Church and listen to the sermon from the cool of the shade. Often they serve breakfast after the service under the tree. In the past, many of these beautiful trees were cut down for boat building, and few large ones are left. When there was a proposal to cut down the Lignum Vitae by the Post Office to expand the building, a group of St. Johnians protested by the tree, and were able to save it.

Another favorite gathering place is by the Tamarind trees at Hansen Bay on the East End, where people have probably been congregating in the shade for hundreds of years. Some of their limbs were cut off to make charcoal, which was an important industry on St. John at one time. Their seed pods are valued for their sticky sweet-sour pulp that people eat raw, stew with sugar as a dessert, add to soups and stews for flavoring, or make into refreshing drinks. According to Nichols, it is also a spirit tree:

“It can house spirits. Local belief is that you do not want to sit under a Tamarind tree at night lest a Jumbie follow you home. The Jumbie is believed to be a spirit that may be harmful or benign or playful or mischievous, something to be avoided or cautious of. However if you are pure of heart you have nothing to fear!”

The Hansen Bay Tamarind trees have hosted many fish fries, beach parties picnics and fundraisers. Beginning in the 1990s, the Coral Bay Yacht Club partnered with the Guy Benjamin School to raise money and provide sailing experiences through an event called The Flotilla. Sailors offered rides on their boats over to Hansen Bay for a big event. The women of Coral Bay would fix lots of delicious West Indian food and the school kids would all get to sail aboard Captain Elliot's Silver Cloud or Peter Muilenberg's Breath. It was a wonderful collaborative effort! Some of the money raised was used to build benches that surround the largest of the Tamarind trees.

One of our long-revered spirit trees is the Kapok or silk cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*). The Tainos originally landed on St. John in dugout canoes carved out of their trunks. There is a large one behind the Bethany Moravian church, and a beautiful specimen at the entrance to the employee parking at Caneel Bay. In Mayan culture the Kapok is viewed as the Tree of Life whose roots extend to the underworld and whose branches hold up the Heavens. Amerindian and African cultures also feel a spiritual connection to this tree. It was believed to be unsafe to cut down a Kapok tree, for it would anger the spirits. A paper by Robert Nichols, *Medicinal Trees of the US Virgin Islands*, reports that the leaves can be used for fatigue, sprains, skin issues, and sore throats, while a root infusion relieves diabetes.

There are several very large and valued native Gri-gri trees (*Bucida buceras*). One is located in the Trunk Bay ruins, where it towers over all the other trees. Another is in the backyard at the Pickles Deli in Coral Bay, a lively gathering place (with open mic music events on Wednesday nights and a yearly art show called the Bizarre Bazaar). This tall Gri-gri must be several hundred years old. The base is over three feet around and it has a wide, spreading canopy.

Raintrees (*Samanea saman*) also have large, umbrella shaped canopies, plus fluffy flowers and pods that taste like licorice. There is a nice one at the Coral Bay Agricultural Center, but the one at Cinnamon Bay is the largest. When architect/builder Glenn Speer was hired to build the restaurant at the campground there, Laurance Rockefeller asked him to build around the tree so it could be preserved and admired. Both trees are believed to be hundreds of years old.

The Genip or Kenip (*Melicoccus bijugatus*) is one of the most commonly found trees here. It is not native but has become naturalized as its seeds are spread by people and animals eating its fruit. When my children were tree climbers, we spent a lot of time picking and eating genips – Mother Nature’s candies. The most famous Genip tree on St John grew on Mamee Peak for over 150 years, along the original road from Coral Bay to Cruz Bay that came up the old King’s Hill road. This tree became known as the Mission Rest Tree. Missionaries who traveled by donkey or horse from the Emmaus Moravian Church in Coral Bay to the Bethany Moravian Church would stop and rest at the top of the hill by this tree, enjoying the gorgeous views and breezes. In the early 1960s when Richard Metcalf and his family moved to St John, they camped by this tree in a tent (with a piano) while building their home on Mamee Peak. The tree’s trunk was about 3 feet around, with limbs coming out everywhere that created a lot of shade. Richard believes the tree was sheared off by the Hurricane of 1920. There was still fruit on half the tree, but unfortunately, drought weakened it and it died in 1995 during Hurricane Marilyn.

The native Guavaberry (*Myrciaria floribunda*) produces a berry that is delicious in tarts, jam, and ice cream, which is my family’s favorite. In a good year, the tree bears fruit in the late fall. People traditionally made a spicy guavaberry liqueur to be drunk at Christmas time, using berry-infused rum spiced with fresh ginger root, nutmeg and cinnamon. Recipes were kept as family secrets, and contests held to judge which had the best flavor. There is even a Christmas song that celebrates this tradition:

“Good morning, good morning I’ve come for my guavaberry,  
Good morning, good morning so put it on the table,  
Good morning , good morning I wish you a Merry Christmas,  
Good morning, good morning, to you and all your family. Good morning!”

After the carolers finished the song, the host would serve glasses of the liqueur.

The native Turpentine tree (*Bursera simaruba*) is easy to identify by its red peeling bark and heavy, aromatic resin. St. Johnian Douglas Matthais said you should never climb turpentine trees because they are not strong. At Christmas, he would bruise the tree to get gluey resin to use in making tree decorations. At other times, he used this resin to glue together toy boats he sailed in Mandahl Pond. They were made from the soft wood of a mampoo tree, with fabric scraps from his mother’s sewing serving as sails. According to Eleanor Gibney, the native Taino Indians also used the resin on their dugout canoes, including as a varnish.

Our beaches would not be the same without the Sea Grape trees (*Cocoloba uvifera*). They provide much needed shade for beachgoers, and at the same time protect the beach from erosion. This native plant is very salt tolerant, so it can grow where other plants cannot. The grapes have traditionally been used for jelly and wine, but Mariel Matthias reported that her family also made Sea Grape rum from them.

The native Bay Rum tree (*Pimenta racemosa*) was one of the first trees I came to know when I moved to St. John. Bordeaux Mountain is the perfect environment for these trees. Growing them was once an important local industry, as their leaves were distilled into bay rum oil for a popular aftershave. The aromatic leaves can be added to stews and teas, or used to treat fevers, chills, aches and pains, and ward off insects.

Finally I must mention the incredible West Indian Mahogany tree that graces the Virgin Islands. Though not indigenous, it has been naturalized and grows very well here on St. John. The Mahogany trees that line the streets in Cruz Bay were threatened in the 1980s, but a group of concerned St. Johnians took to the streets and saved these majestic trees from overzealous development. Cruz Bay Park has several very large ones, and people gather under them daily to escape the sun. This area has always served as a 'meet and greet' spot for people arriving on the ferries, and also hosts many cultural events. The Mahogany trees stand as witnesses to the daily happenings in Cruz Bay, including steel pan band concerts, election speeches, art shows, protest marches and Santa Claus visits.



Tyer Palm by Suki's house, overlooking Coral Bay

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THIS BOOK is meant to help both residents and visitors in identifying and learning about trees and plants on St. John.

Part 1 points out some of the notable trees in the Cruz Bay area, and includes a map (page 4) that shows the sections of town referred to, so people can walk around and use the book to identify particular trees.

Part 2 presents photographs of trees and plants grouped by distinguishing characteristics that ordinary people can easily recognize, such as flowers, fruits or thorns. It also identifies some potentially dangerous ones.

One of the key Unitarian Universalist principles is: "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Trees and plants, whether native or introduced, help define the unique experience of life in this place, and as we learn more about them we develop a greater appreciation for their complexity and value.

In the course of the project, we learned that many native trees are currently threatened by a combination of factors, including droughts, deer grazing, development projects and imported pests. We hope that the information in this book encourages people to pay more attention to the native trees and plants, and to assist in preserving them.



Excerpts from *Nature*, an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson who was an important figure in the Unitarian movement:

*“In the woods, we return to reason and faith.”*

*“The succession of native plants in the pastures and roadsides, which makes the silent clock by which time tells the hours, will make even the divisions of the day sensible to a keen observer. The tribes of birds and insects, like the plants punctual to their time, follow each other, and the year has room for all.”*



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