

Some Plant Reminiscences of Southern Florida*

by DAVID FAIRCHILD

HISTORY so far as it concerns plants is a thing which belongs in an entirely different category from the history of human beings and their behaviour towards each other. Just where the difference lies will be hard to explain but before I launch out into a series of reminiscent remarks I would like to try and make my point.

Human beings are pretty well known to other humans. Almost any little child knows how many legs a human being has and what are the principal characteristics of humans but there are very few artists or historians who have very definite ideas of the characteristics of even the commonest plant. I have been often taken to art collections to be shown paintings of trees which no botanist could ever by any possible means identify. It often requires an expert working for months to identify plants from the word descriptions of historians. I am speaking in terms of the general run of historians. There are doubtless historians whose accounts tally pretty closely with the botanical or the horticultural accounts of the things they are trying to record the behaviour of.

If my audience does not agree with me it may perhaps be because few of them have ever tried to read the word picture of let us say an apple tree. I have chosen here a tree which since the discovery of America has been a more or less constant companion of the American from the time of the pioneers to the present day,—almost as constant a companion as the dog. Suppose I had chosen any one of the newer fruit trees which have come into America in my own lifetime. How many historians are there in the State of Florida who could identify one were he taken up to an avocado tree when it is not in fruit? I repeat that to the masses of mankind history is the account of the doings of man. I am using the word in the sense of the Florida Historical Society, not in the sense of the Naturalist who has his term Natural History to fall back upon. We are not here discussing the descriptions of the other species of living

*Delivered, Annual Meeting, Florida Historical Society, March, 1941 at the Fairchild Tropical Garden.

organisms which inhabit the planet and which descriptions have multiplied enormously since the days of the great botanist Linnæus.

As I sit here at my typewriter and let my mind sweep back over the days which I have spent in the state of Florida, I discover what an impossible task it is to give anything but a most distorted picture of that past. Even the common words which I will have to use do not carry the meanings which they did at that time. The word Avocado in 1898 when there were none in Florida, except an occasional specimen in some experimenter's yard, has a very different meaning now from what it had then. Were I writing in those days I would have to begin with the assumption that none of my readers had the faintest idea what an avocado was, for the word itself had not penetrated into the literature of the Floridians. If they knew anything about the avocado it was as an Alligator Pear. Why alligator and why pear are points I have never quite comprehended. They illustrate what I wish to bring out however, viz. that the so called "things" of history are merely symbols and that it is with these symbols and not with the things that History is mainly concerned.

I think I know what the Program Committee wished me to do when it asked me to present a paper on the history of plant introduction in Florida. But I submit to my audience that what they want me to do and what I can do are very different things indeed.

Let me try to explain how vastly different the task is from writing an account of the human happenings here in the State.

In 1898 when I first came to Florida in company with James Ingraham, the Vice-President of the Florida East Coast Railway, it was to see a little clearing in the Brickell Hammock—now practically a thing of the past. It was with the purpose of seeing if tropical plants could be grown in it and if they could, whether or not these plants would be useful to the people; then a few hundreds only—who were coming to settle here. I was organizing in Washington what was then called a Section of Seed and Plant Introduction.* Of the romance which gathered about that little clearing I could speak in general and passionate terms for it was one of the most interesting places in the world to me then and remains a memory of wonderful days spent with new plants which grew into trees that have been destroyed to make room for an apartment house. This latter was erected where precious "specimens," brought from the

*Now Division of Plant Exploration and Introduction, Bureau of Plant Industry, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

far corners of the world were planted and flowered for the first time on the soil of North America.

It was with the feeling perhaps that words would never suffice to give a picture of the behaviour of the strange looking new things which Edward Simmonds and I planted there in that little garden that I brought my camera down from Washington and began to take photographs of the little plants, small as they were. This feeling of the insufficiency of word symbols has grown upon me and through the years I have continued to take photographs of the "stream of living plants" which has come into Florida through the activities of that Section of Seed and Plant Introduction. These photographs have mounted up and now constitute a real problem for what to do with them and where to store them is the question. Incidentally I imagine there are many which have a significance in the *human history* sense, giving views of people and man-made things which have changed with time and even passed away.

How to record the arrival of a new "Plant Immigrant" as I decided to call these plant introductions in order to dramatize them somewhat and drag them out into the light where people could see them and stop calling them by such generalized names as "plant growths" or "tropical verdure" or just "tropical vegetation" or "economic plant material," became a problem, and my friend O. F. Cook and I decided upon a system by which a printed account of the arrival of every plant species or variety was made. It is to this record of over 180 thousand introductions that I would refer the historians in search of historical data. In the 16 volumes on my desk here before me I can find the abstracts taken from Agricultural Explorers Notes or traveller's journals or letters relating to particular plants of which the seeds were collected in some foreign country.

The commonest tree on the streets of Coral Gables, which is being superseded now by the slower growing species, *Pithecolobium dulce*, was brought to Washington Dec. 1st 1899 by a Botanical Collector whose work on the plants of Mexico is a matter of record. His name was Dr. Edward Palmer and I had the pleasure of taking down from his rapid-fire conversation descriptions of his collections of the seeds of many interesting plants. He took no photographs but made dried specimens of leaves and fruits which he had collected and preserved. The seeds of this Mexican tree, known as Huamuchil to the Mexicans of Guymas, soon attracted Edward Simmonds' attention because of their rapid growth; they germinated in a day or two when put in the ground. With the mushroom growth of buildings and street construction which began

in the Miami area soon after its arrival here, it kept pace and quick effects could be produced with it which vied with those secured by the use of an even more rapid growing tree, the Australian *Casuarina equisetifolia*, which came to be called the "Australian Pine" although no relation whatever to a pine. Take these two trees out of the landscapes of the Miami of those days and one wonders what would have been found to take their places; something slower growing but better perhaps.

Another tree from Australia has had a picturesque career. The Cajeput tree, *Melaleuca leucadendron*. Introduced by my friend Dr. John C. Gifford as a small packet of seeds so tiny that neither he nor Ed. Simmonds felt able to undertake their germination without greenhouse facilities, the first seedlings were produced in the Greenhouse in Washington and sent down as little spindling things to find a home here. This they did with a vengeance and soon these seedlings bore such quantities of seeds that we planted a row of them at Davie on the edge of the Everglades where an Experiment station had been started by some Real Estate developers. I have a series of photographs showing how those trees grew and how their seedlings covered the surrounding land then occupied by an orange grove. They completely smothered the orange trees with their growth and I thought at one time that they threatened to sweep over the Everglades and transform their broad prairies into an Australian landscape. Today the builders of new white-walled houses on Miami Beach and elsewhere are paying fancy prices for this striking white barked tree and planting it beside their front doorways as choice decorative specimens.

I have chosen these examples for the reason that I assume there are many present who know them by name. But I wonder as I sit here and try to visualize a history which would take into consideration anything but the doings of humans, how it would be possible to substitute the names of these trees under which today thousands of little children play, for the political and military and movie star names of humans with which the so called "literature" of the period is filled. Would it be possible ever to bring a blush of shame to the cheek of a young girl in her teens in any way comparable to that which suffuses it when the teacher discovers that she never even heard of Queen Elizabeth or King Arthur of the Round Table, or Napoleon or Theodore Roosevelt or George Washington the Father of his Country, by disclosing to the class that although she plays under a Cajeput tree every day she does not have any idea what it is nor that it has a history which reaches back beyond the days of the arrival of men and women on this planet? She

would scoff at the very idea that it mattered. All her friends and classmates are familiar with the names of people. They would shame her if she could not give the names of the great movie stars. They would never bother her if she shrugged her shoulders and threw out her hands and remarked that she didn't know and didn't care; that it was just a tree.

No. The names of people and the things they eat and drink and do, take precedence over everything else in this world as it stands today. If you do not believe this look at any newspaper or popular magazine or simply look out of your car as it speeds along through the ghastly wilderness of vari-colored signs which disfigure landscapes which were once pleasant things to gaze upon. We have, let us say, a half million sign boards at least scattered about through the Miami area, repeating ad nauseam the name of some food or drug or drink. But where is there a single word of explanation, where anyone can see it, that relates to any other living organism than the one species *Homo sapiens*? The names of these man-made stuffs have been seared into the minds of the children as the initials of the ranchers of the plains are seared with a red hot iron into the flanks of their yearling calves. The children cannot escape. They must know these things for their fellows know them and will make fun of them if they don't.

It is into this state of affairs that I am invited to walk calmly and dispassionately and in twenty minutes give a sketch of the "history" of the introduction of plants into South Florida.

Ladies and gentlemen you have not the necessary vocabulary at your command to enable you to follow me were I to give you for example the names alone of the twenty most spectacular introductions. You would have to have a glossary in your hand to identify the characters of my story. Anthony Adverse has so many characters in it that I who read few novels get confused and have to turn back to see which person has come on the stage now. In the history you desire me to write, you who would attempt to read it would not even have any visual picture whatever of what my characters looked like, for they would not bear the semblance of the human form with which you are so familiar that you do not need to know just what he looked like. You can make your own imaginary picture of humans.

Let me see if I can illustrate such a history of plant introduction without photographs for your enlightenment.

When I arrived in Miami in 1898 and went to the little garden on Brickell Avenue I found Herbert J. Webber standing beside a tree of the *Seratonia siliqua* or Carob the seeds of which I had sent him from

the shores of Italy. He was sure that it would be a great thing here and I felt pleased to see it. Forty-three years have passed and the other day I found a friend of mine growing the carob in a few tin cans, thinking to try it out again. It is a Mediterranean tree and does not like the wet summers of Florida.

In the same garden there were growing some trees of the White Sapote (*Casimiroa edulis*) the fruits of which Wilson Popenoe in his "Manual of Tropical Plants" described thus: "The white sapote is a medium sized erect or spreading tree, having palmately compound leaves, small inconspicuous flowers, and yellowish green fruits the size of an orange. The fruits have a thin membranaceous skin, yellowish flesh of soft melting texture and sweet or slightly bitter flavor, and one to five large oval or elliptic seeds." Popenoe wrote this 21 years ago. I have growing on my Kampong at this time and they are loaded with young fruits a number of varieties as distinct as the Wine Sap apple is from the Stark's Delicious, of this White Sapote and I would not be able to recognize the things I have here from such a description as Popenoe gives; and yet his description is a fair one as horticultural descriptions go.

You see what a wierd thing a history of Florida Horticulture would be from my point of view.

I think I can elucidate the difficulty somewhat by referring to some of the new work which is being done in the field of symbols for we must recognize that there is a fundamental difference between a word symbol and the thing itself.

There are two ways of teaching a person what a thing is. The common easy chair or class room method is to "describe it." Get a dictionary and read about it. The dictionary description is composed of words and many of those words you will have to look up too and if you look up all the words you will find that you have yet another crop of other words. You get only such a picture of the thing as your imagination builds out of what experiences you have had with similar things. In the case of the White Sapote a child would get nothing from the dictionary which would enable it to recognize a White Sapote were he to be brought where a tree loaded with fruits was standing. This method in the new parlance of my friend Count Alfred Korzybski is the "*intensional*" method; the method of definitions; the Aristotelian method if you please.

Now the other method which he calls the *extensional* method is to take the child to a White Sapote tree and let him feel its leaves and fruit and sink his teeth into its delicious fruit flesh.

But how can such a method be used in the crowded class rooms? It

cannot, and here is where the rub comes. I doubt if it is worth while to try to teach a child what a White Sapote is from a book. There are many principles in the use of symbols which can be drilled into children's heads in the class room but by the intensional methods mighty little that is worth while about practical horticulture. And so I come to the kernel of my remarks.

If it is desirable that the history of the horticulture of Florida be written in such form that it will be something more than another leaflet or short lived book to please the imaginations of those who delight in those fantasies of the past which come as one reads "accounts of past occurrences," some museum and permanent garden method will I suspect have to be worked out; something that will keep on display as the museums of natural history and the great Zoological gardens do, the actual objects in the life, or their stuffed skins or the best possible photographs of the things, or life sized models; something besides those futile word descriptions which so often merely confuse the mind.

In the Fairchild Tropical Garden and this Palm Museum I think there has been made a small beginning that is pointed in the right direction. It deserves to have the most serious attention attracted to it in order that it may be built up into an institution of education of the *extensional* kind where in the future thousands of little children will come and see for themselves, with their own eyes, not through those of book writers, the living *elements*, other than man-fashioned, which make the world of actualities. To consign little children to a life of the streets and buildings where they see nothing living but other beings like themselves is it seems to me to dwarf their imaginations and start them along the road to that mode of life which ends in wars and insanities of various kinds.

In my imagination I picture a historic scene in which the origin of the citrus groves of Florida would be shown; the kinds of citrus fruits from which the orange arose in China; the palm groves of the Tropics, the industries which have been built around the various species; the nut trees, the spice trees, the poison trees; the hundreds of kinds of fruit species with opportunities for tasting the fruits; the gorgeous vines gathered from all over the tropics; the fiber plants; and the host of flowering trees and shrubs the use of which about our homes will transform them into abodes of beauty such as the world has never yet seen.

This dream is one which has grown with the years of my experience here and has become more and more of a reality and my conviction of its possibility has been strengthened.

The insanity of this terrible war will pass and leave deep scars on the

minds of millions of children scattered throughout the whole world and some methods more comprehensive than those we have been using must be evolved in order to bring these children into a realization that they must know things from actually seeing and touching them and not from merely pronouncing their names. Children are being borne into a world of symbols. Let us drill the fact that it is a world of symbols into their minds and give them *actual living* things to get acquainted with for comparison.

I am conscious that I have probably not made my point clear but I have taken up your time and explained why I am incapable of writing a "Historical Sketch" of the Plant Introduction work here in Florida.

My photographic collections, all my notes and so called historical records and the living plants with which I have associated I hope may some day be utilized along the lines of a great out-of-doors museum or arboretum and garden in which the children can play and learn what a world of fascinating romance this world of the plants really is, quieting, and saner than the world of the human beings.

THE KAMPONG, COCONUT GROVE, FLORIDA

March 26th, 1941