

# Random Records of Tropical Florida

By HENRY PERRINE

\* Reprinted from the *Magazine of Horticulture*, edited by C. M. Hovey, September, 1840. Dr. Perrine identifies himself as "Superintendent of the Tropical Plant Company, Indian Key, Fla." Dr. Mark F. Boyd of Tallahassee called this item to our attention and supplied the copy from his collection.

1840—JULY 4. Thermometer 83°. Ye northerners, who have not ever resided in tropical climates, cannot realize the delightful reality of the delicious temperature of the summer season. You readily conceive the comforts of exemption from cold, during the months equivalent to your winter season, but you cannot readily conceive the comforts of exemption from heat, during the months equivalent to your summer season. I am now writing in the cupola of my dwelling, which is erected over the sea. The constant trade wind is blowing its ever grateful sea breeze; and the temperature of 83° will show you what a cooling luxury the constant wind must be. In Boston, the thermometer may likely indicate ten degrees more of scorching heat, at this very hour. By the bye, I have selected from Mr. Howe's tables the temperature of several notable days in December and January last. Thus;—1839; December 22, 71°, 72°:—December 25, 71°, 76°.—1840; January 1, 70°, 72°:—January 8, 64°, 52°. You perceive that these are the dates of the landing of the pilgrims at Plymouth; of Christmas; of New Year; and of the victory over the British, at New Orleans. Recollect the weather, at the same dates, in Boston, or refer to your own meteorological registers, and you will then more fully *feel* the delightful difference of the weather of South Florida. To assist your conceptions of our climate, I subjoin an abstract of our weather, for four years, from January 1, 1836, to January 4, 1940.

Annual Clear days, 289 to 314.	Widest annual extremes of Fahrenheit's thermom. 50° to 90°.
Annual cloudy days, 15 to 36.	Greatest monthly changes, 31° to 34°.
Annual rainy days, 36 to 60.	Least monthly changes, 6° to 8°.
Rainy days in rainy season, from June 1, to October 1; 14 in 1837, and 26 in 1839—the least and greatest numbers.	Least daily changes, 0° to 1°.
	Greatest daily changes, 11° to 14°.

With an average of three hundred sunny days every year, and only 40° of annual range of the thermometer; with a greatest monthly change of 34°, and a greatest daily change of 14°, you will readily conceive the superlative superiority of the tropical climate of South Florida.

Mr. Howe and myself have experienced the great pleasure, to-day, of making another remittance of valuable plants and seeds to the native Bahamians at Key Vacas. The poor people of that rocky island do not appear to appreciate the importance of propagating the Manilla mulberry trees, and Sea Island cotton shrubs: and as their civil magistrates, Temple Rut and William Whitehead, Esqrs., have commenced the culture of both, we indulge the hope that their example will be imitated by their fellow citizens. Indeed, my intimate acquaintance with the native Bahamians has dispelled the prejudices naturally created among strangers, by the speculating monopolists of Key West, who commonly designate these amiable people by the insulting nickname of "lazy conks." But, by personal observations, I am now fully satisfied that our agricultural statesmen would promptly pronounce that the humblest grower of sweet potatoes at Key Vacas is an infinitely more useful citizen of South Florida, than the haughtiest office-holder of Key West.

The first settlers at Key Vacas in 1831-2, located under the leases from Mr. Howe, who, with his brother, then held the title to the group of islands called Cayos Vacas, or the Key of Cows. Having subsequently disposed of all the islands, (save Duck Key,) to a Mr. Edmonston, in Charleston, S. C., and the distant proprietor having been disinclined to encourage any permanent settlement, the actual inhabitants are merely tenants at will, and are hence without adequate excitements to make permanent improvements. Nevertheless, the commencement of the savage war induced the later emigrants from the Bahamas to cluster round their countrymen at Key Vacas, until the population now amounts to about two hundred persons. As soon, however, as hostilities shall cease, or as soon as Government shall guarantee only forty acres of public lands to each settler during the war, they will occupy the unsurveyed islands along the reef, and especially the preferable soils and sites of the chain called Key Largo. These temporary tenants of Key Vacas, nevertheless, have erected about fifty dwellings, half of them the very humble habitations of palmetto thatch alone, while others are comfortable frame buildings, of which some have neat palmetto roofs. After ineffectual endeavors to obtain a public school from the territorial government, they have recently established themselves a private school; and a few philanthropists are now endeavoring to encourage their progress in the

means of literary and religious instruction. They now perceive that the production of raw silk and of Sea Island cotton can be easily accomplished by the feeblest hands of their women and children alone; and that these two precious staples will afford ample funds for schools and churches. The multiplication of these valuable plants which can be effected this very summer, will supply them sufficient stock in the fall or winter, to transfer with them to their permanent settlements on the unsurveyed public islands.

JULY 8.—By my first communication, you were apprized of the facts of the only mail packet facilities from Charleston, S. C., viz. that the only monthly mail was suspended during the first six months of 1839; and that the mail packet itself was wrecked on the third trip, in September. A new vessel was subsequently employed in the service, and continued to make monthly trips until last April. During the month of May, the contractor failed to send any mail. They however had a new schooner constructed, which commenced its first monthly voyage last June. She is called the “Hayne—” extended her last trip beyond Key West to Havana, in Cuba, the 15th of every month. Should this arrangement continue, the people of Indian Key can procure fruit monthly from Havana, and thus far become partially independent of the inimical population of Key West.\*

JULY 9,—I observe that you consider the subjects of my communications are more important to the agricultural than to the horticultural portion of the community. In writing, however, for your journal, I do not consider it to be merely a horticultural periodical. On the contrary, it embraces more important topics on the culture of plants in green-houses, hothouses, and family apartments. It therefore contains more notices of tropical plants than of extra-tropical plants: it should therefore be christened with the comprehensive title of Magazine of *Vegeculture*. During many years, I have been obliged to use the terms of *vegeculture* and *vegecultural*, to indicate the objects of my own pursuits. Any care of any plant is a culture of that plant. The human labor employed in the propagation of all vegetables constitutes the human culture of those vegetables. The culture of vegetables is naturally expressed by the combination of words—*vegeculture*. *Vegeculture* is therefore the most comprehensive classifying term: agriculture, horticulture, arboriculture, floriculture, &c. are subdivisions of *vegeculture*. Look, then, at your articles which contain notices of the exhibitions of the Horticultural Societies of the United States. They are mostly plants in pots, from green-houses and hot-houses; they are mostly tropical plants.

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\* Nevertheless, her shortened stay in Charleston, S. C. will seldom leave time for northern answers to letters by the return mail.

I see, with regret, your notice of the death of the Hon. John Lowell. In August, 1838, I passed an hour with him, in his hot-house, at Roxbury. As he had recently returned from Cuba, he was entirely competent to appreciate the importance of accumulating tropical plants in tropical Florida. He was aware of the fact, that the poorest propagator of perennial plants, on the Florida Keys, can easily surround his humble habitation with a much more magnificent collection of tropical plants, than the proudest possessor of millions of dollars, in wintry Massachusetts, can ever accumulate in the costly hot-houses of monied ostentation.

I also observe, that seeds from the Southern Exploring Expedition were presented to the Horticultural Society of Pennsylvania, by John McArran, of Philadelphia, to whom they were sent by the Secretary of the Navy. In July, 1838, I was indebted to the politeness of Mr. McArran for my visits to some collections of tropical plants; and I therefore, in repayment, now suggest to him the profitable propriety of abandoning his endeavors to have his own collections transferred to the city of Washington, and of turning his energies to the accumulation of valuable plants in a supply nursery on the Florida Keys. Among the collections of tropical plants seen by me in Philadelphia, in July, 1838, I was most pleased with the splendid specimens of Mr. John B. Smith. With his taste and talents, one tenth of the capital in South Florida would create tenfold supplies of similar plants for the green-houses and hot-houses of the northern states. Indeed, I cannot conceive a more profitable employment of capital than could be made in South Florida, by raising plants to supply the green-houses and hot-houses of the northern states, at one half the usual prices. What a great pity it is, however, that all the philo-vegiculturists of tropical plants, in the hot-houses of the United States, are almost utterly ignorant of the delightful district of tropical Florida!

JULY 10.—Notwithstanding your readers have not transmitted a single seed of the tropics through the patent office for the preparatory nursery at West Maticumba, I shall continue my endeavors to supply the northern hot-houses through that only channel, the agricultural department of the enlightened commissioner, H. L. Ellsworth, in Washington. By the copy of one letter from him, in reply to one remittance from me, you will perceive that he is duly sensible for the national importance of my individual services. I have now well founded hopes that the poor people of Key Vacas will collect the tropical seeds of the indigenous plants of those rocky Keys. I have found it, however, extremely difficult to make them conceive that I

prefer a handful of wild seeds to a bushel of cultivated beans—one wild fruit of custard apple, for its seeds, to ten cultivated fruits of water-melons for their flesh—or one wild root of the indigenous coontee (*Zámia inegri-fólia*,) to one hundred cultivated shoots of the sweet potato (*Convolvulus batatas*.) They are very grateful for my gratuitous services in curing diseases and encouraging education among them, but they cannot readily conceive that the greatest manifestations of their gratitude, in my estimation, will consist in the simple collection of spontaneous seeds and products of the Florida Keys. I wrote to you the failure of my attempts to induce them last summer to propagate the sixty-three varieties of cultivable seeds, gratuitously presented to them by me. Nevertheless, as I have excited their civil magistrates to commence the propagation of the Manilla silk mulberry trees, and the Sea Island cotton shrubs, I am again confiding to other inhabitants superior varieties, especially of their favorite curbitaceous productions. Squashes, pumpkins, musk-melons, water-melons, &c, are all products of patches in their common field of perennial sweet potatoes. Now I wish you and your readers to understand distinctly, that I do not want a single seed or plant exclusively for my own use, or for the exclusive use of any tropical plant company which Mr. Howe and myself may be compelled to organize, to overcome the obstacles to individual industry, interposed by the exclusive monopoly of Key West.

I have shown you that Mr. Howe and Capt. Houseman are the only old residents who have the taste and means to propagate and preserve precious plants. But I do not want any person in the northern states to transmit any seeds or plants to any person or place in South Florida, unless he be a philanthropic philo-vegeculturist, who makes the transmission for the public benefit of South Florida, and for the general advantage of the whole United States. The transmitter should consider it a great honor to be the first introducer of any valuable plant into South Florida. One plant of a hot-house in Massachusetts, transmitted by the proprietor to South Florida, would entitle him to greater honor than his whole collection in his own possession. The first person who transmits a single Manilla hemp banana to South Florida will enjoy as enviable a celebrity as the first introducer of the Manilla silk mulberry into the United States. Mons. Perrotet introduced both the *Mórus Multicaúlis* and the *Músa abáca* from the Phillipine Islands to the Garden of Plants in Paris, and to the French colonies in the East and West Indies, to Guadaloupe and Cayenne. Mrs. Parmentier, of Brooklyn, L. I., transmitted to Cape Florida the first *Mórus multicaúlis* introduced by me, on the

20th of May, 1833, for which my profound gratitude was manifested in the *Farmer's Register*. Madame Parmentier also transmitted, at the same period, the first New Zealand flax lily, or *Phormium tenax*, which however, perished by neglect. Indeed, all plants transmitted by me, or for me, to Cape Florida, necessarily perished from gross neglect, except those plants which propagate themselves, and which hence have continued to spread themselves, in spite of the inundations of the ocean and the incursions of the Indians. Indeed, the great difficulties of obtaining the indigenous plants which are propagated by their suckers alone, are the great motives for the powerful interposition of governmental assistance. The indigenous plant, called rice, is easily obtained and introduced and propagated, because it is propagated by prolific seeds. The indigenous plants called sugar cane, are also obtained, introduced and propagated with comparative ease, because they are propagated by prolific cuttings. The exogenous plants, called grape vine and silk mulberries, are also introduced and extended with comparative facilities, because they are also propagated by prolific cuttings. But the Manilla hemp bananas, the New Zealand flax lilies, and the Sisal hemp agaves, cannot be easily obtained in their native countries, cannot be easily imported into South Florida, and cannot be prolifically propagated in South, because they are propagated by bulky unprolific suckers. Yet, when once introduced, they are superior to all other profitable plants in the admirable fact, that they continue to propagate themselves.

In Mexico, in the Phillipines, and in New Zealand, governmental vessels are requisite to obtain the plants, on account of the opposition of the barbarous natives. If the species of *Musa Phormium*, *Agave*, *Bromelia*, and other fibrous leaved plants, were as easily obtainable and propagable, as are the species of *Morus*, *Gossypium*, and other fibrous barked plants, the commercial cupidity of native Americans would have sufficed to introduce and diffuse them many years ago. Nevertheless, so highly do I appreciate the importance of associating my name with the introduction of a single plant of the Manilla hemp banana into South Florida, that I have tempted our plant traders (the Thorburns, &c) by proffering two hundred per cent. net profits on the first *Musa abaca* that shall arrive in safety at Indian Key. As it is said that the *Phormium tenax* has matured its seeds in the south of France, it is to be hoped that some seeds may be thence obtained for South Florida through the patent office at Washington. I naturally wish to retain life long enough to see the most precious plants of the tropics actually spreading in South Florida, but I am not anxious to be the first introducer

of all precious plants. The Sisal hemp agaves, the Yucatan cotton shrubs, and the Manilla silk mulberries, are sufficient monuments of my ambitious perseverance.

By the last of March I obtained the first tea plant from Charleston, S. C., for the special care of my younger daughter; and by the next mail I shall endeavor to obtain the first olive tree for my elder daughter; and a New Zealand flax lily for my only son. My children are destined to be residents for life of South Florida, and I therefore fix their permanent affections in its slandered soils by the deep tap-roots of valuable perennial plants, to be grown by their own hands, in their own lands.

At pages 29 to 31 of the *Farmer's Register* for January 31, 1840, under the heading of "Governmental Obstacles to the Propagation of Tropical Plants in South Florida," you will see a sketch of the origin and objects of the two acts of incorporation of the Tropical Plant Company. During my first visit to Key West, from the 17th of June to the 17th of July, 1837, I ascertained that James Webb, then Judge of the District, was the only reputable resident, whose character and condition combined the circumstances essential for a co-trustee of any tropical plant company. Judge Webb also corroborated my own opinion, that Charles Howe, Esq., inspector of the customs at Indian Key, was the only other person, on the Florida Keys, entirely suitable to be our official associate; and therefore volunteered to draft the new charter of incorporation, and obtain its passage by the legislative council of the territory, during the next ensuing session.

The new act, then, approved the 8th of February, 1838, was the voluntary work of James Webb, at Tallahassee, while I was pursuing my own labors at Washington, to obtain a congressional grant of a township of land. To fulfil the objects of that congressional act, my principal plans embraced the primary gift of a sufficient quantity of land to the Tropical Plant Company, for the purpose of establishing a nursery of supply, and a model of cultivation of tropical plants. Judge Webb well knew the indispensable necessity of the intermediate measure of an additional port of entry, for the requisite removal of governmental obstacles to individual industry; and therefore, unknown to Mr. Howe or myself, he addressed an official letter to the Hon. Secretary of the Treasury, warmly recommending that Mr. Howe should be appointed first collector of the new port of entry. The long session of Congress closed the 7th July, 1838, with the usual neglect of necessary bills; and, under these circumstances, at New York, Oct. 15, 1838, I addressed a circular "To the Friends of the Enterprise," announcing that "the trustees will de-



lay the organization of the company; and will apply their personal resources to the formation of a preparatory nursery at Indian Key, and the adjacent islets."

On the 8th January, 1839, the preparatory nursery for tropical plants was established by Mr. Howe and myself on West Matacumba, one mile west of Indian Key; but the insuperable obstacles to introducing into it the tropical plants of the Bahama Islands, &c., induced me, on the 22d October, 1839, to address to you the communication of that date which appeared in the Dec. number of your Magazine. Unfortunately for the company, the emigration of James Webb to Texas, (where he became secretary of state,) has deprived the remaining trustees of their only legal associate; and there has not yet arrived in South Florida any suitable personage to supply the vacancy of presiding trustee. The Hon. A. W. Snyder, M. C. of Illinois, was confidently expected at Indian Key, during the last autumn, to become a citizen for life of South Florida; but up to the present July we have not any news of him, and fear that he is dead. Our next hopes were directed towards E. A. Williams, Esq., of your city of Boston, but months have elapsed without a line from him to Mr. Howe. But, under all events, Mr. Howe and myself are absolutely determined to remain without another associate trustee, until some person shall arrive much more suitable than any actual resident of the Florida Keys, including the sine qua non circumstance of citizenship for life of South Florida. Nevertheless, if Congress shall adjourn without opening an additional port of entry this session, we shall be compelled to endeavor to organize the Company prior to the next session of Congress, for the special purpose of enlisting the influence requisite to excite congressional action towards the bare restoration of desert freedom to individual industry in the desert district of South Florida. If Congress merely grant the humble prayers of the numerous memorials of the poor people of the Florida Keys, during the months of February, March and April, the actual residents alone will suffice to expel the murderous savages from the delightful everglades, and thus soon terminate the nominal warfare in South Florida.

JULY 12—The mail schooner Hayne has arrived with your June number of the Magazine. I had hoped to see in it some extracts from my manuscript\* in your hands, especially under the headings of "Tropical Products of South Florida," where everything is tropical: not merely its botany, but its zoology, is exclusively tropical phytology. Conchology, ichthyology, ornithology are tropical subdivisions of its tropical zoology. I renew and extend my proffers of gratuitous collections at Indian Key, as long as I remain there.

\* This has never been received.—Ed.



Mr. Howe writes to his nephew at Lowell, Mass., that he will supply barrels of products to his order, in Charleston or New York. He will also send to you by the present packet, on her return, some ripe fruit of the Manilla mulberries, of the second crop this year.\*\* You have already some berries of the first crop, in February, and you will soon have some berries of the second crop in June or July. The fig trees do bear two full crops on this coral rock; but the present crop of Manilla mulberries is our first evidence that they may also bear two annual crops. You will perceive that the sum and substance of his desires, and of my desires, embrace the speedy emigration of agricultural settlers of virtuous habits. We mutually wish to exhibit solely the facts, which should excite immediate emigration of sober cultivators of profitable plants. The preemption laws of the United States have sufficed for the settlement of all our other new territories, and would have sufficed for the settlement of South Florida, had it not been subjected to the exclusive monopoly at Key West, ever since the exchange of national flags in 1822. Nevertheless, the first emigrants next autumn from October to December, can profitably employ themselves in the propagation of the Manilla silk mulberries and the Sea Island cotton shrubs, because the cuttings of the former and the seeds of the latter can be obtained cheaply and abundantly. I have obtained, expressly for gratuitous distribution, six bushels of select seeds, of the finest Sea Island cotton, and they will be planted at intervals this summer, to create an ample supply for all emigrants in the autumn or winter ensuing. I have to use the words of the north, called autumn and winter, although we have not the seasons of the north.

To illustrate how little our national senators are acquainted with the climate and soil of South Florida, I refer you to the opposition of Hon. C. Clay, of Alabama, to the congressional act for the introduction and propagation of tropical plants:—"For aught he knew, the grantees might select a township valuable enough for the cultivation of Sea Island cotton." Indeed! He was not aware that every acre of the calcareous earth of South Florida is the most valuable in the world, both in soil and climate, for the cultivation of Sea Island cotton. He was not aware that the grantees could *not* select a single acre which was NOT valuable enough for the cultivation of Sea Island cotton. He did not know that Sea Island cotton was introduced into the southern states from the neighboring Bahama Islands. He does not know that on the Florida Keys it is a perennial plant of many years' duration—that Mr. Howe has plants at Duck Key from seed sown eight or nine

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\*\* These were received.

years ago—that at Key Vacas there is a shrub of Sea Island cotton in bearing ever since 1823. He does not know, and cannot conceive, that, for this very reason, it cannot be profitably cultivated by large planters with numerous slaves; and that, vice versa, it can be most profitably propagated by small cultivators with feeble families. Indeed, it will be a more profitable business for family occupation than even the silk mulberry, in South Florida. The principal recommendation for the production of silk in South Florida is the fact, that it can be produced at any hour when the person or his family has not any thing better to do. But silly must he be who shall pluck leaves, to feed silk-worms, during the same days that he can pluck pods of Sea Island cotton.

I observe that a Mr. Beath, of Boston, has invented an improvement of the Sea Island cotton machine, (gin,) more important to poor propagators of Sea Island cotton shrubs in the Florida Keys, than any modifications of raw silk reels are to the propagators of *Morus multicaulis* trees. The advantages, however, of the propagation of both the cotton shrubs and silk trees, on the Florida Keys, will extend to the poorest people of the remotest northern states. The dry season of South Florida extends from November to May, and silk can be spun and cotton can be plucked every intervening day. Invalids, if poor, have hitherto been debarred of the benefits of spending the wintry seasons of the northern states amid the delightful weather of tropical climates. But, hereafter, consumptive invalids may sail from New England to South Florida in October, and maintain themselves by light healthy labor on the Florida Keys, until the ensuing June. Even the Yankee girls, who annually visit our southern cities for winter employment, may hereafter spend the same months in South Florida, in the more profitable and pleasant pursuits afforded by the cotton shrubs and silk trees of the Florida Keys. Very few, however, will ever think of returning to settle for life again in the northern states, after six months' stay in South Florida, including either the wintry or summer seasons of their native countries.

JULY 16.—Mr. Howe has sent you some naked seed of the *Morus multicaulis*, because the ripe fruit, plucked the earlier days of this month, being left in an open glass, the fleshy portions have been eaten by cockroaches. Dr. Stebbins, of Northampton, Mass., has raised seedling plants of those sent him in the spring of last year, 1839, and will probably grow the seeds of the two crops sent him this year. It seems to me that your interest and duty, as editor of your peculiar journal, should combine to excite you to promulgate every fact connected with tropical Florida. Your journal can

be absolutely filled, every month, for many years, with the materials of these Florida Keys alone. If Prof. Rafinesque, of Philadelphia, or Prof. Torrey, of New York, should spend a single day on a single Key of South Florida, they would find materials for your pages during several months. Dr. Torrey must send his colleague, Dr. Gray, to the Florida Keys, if they really desire to make their great work a complete Flora of North America, or even the United States. My time is necessarily devoted to the immediate means of expelling the savage Seminoles, and other objects connected with the Company.

You should know that, in Europe, the countries of the fig, grape and olive, are calcareous countries; and you should also know, that, both in climate and soil, South Florida is superlatively superior to southern Europe for the propagation of olive and fig trees and grape vines. As, however, these are not exclusively tropical fruits, I have not excited any attention towards their production in South Florida, by public communications in the agricultural periodicals. To personal acquaintances, however, I have suggested that the great profit of the speedy propagation of these celebrated plants, by the first cultivators on the Florida Keys. The New Englanders, however, who have already commenced their improvements in West Matcumba, are not well adapted to form a nursery of select grape vines or fig trees. They have received seven varieties of grape vines for summer trial; but the best period to import such plants from the northern states is in the autumn. Messrs. Goodyear & Co. report, that they have planted two patches, each of five thousand trees, of the Manilla mulberries imported by them from the northern states, by the previous monthly mail, and they declare they shall make large importations of valuable plants, next autumn, to be brought by their colleagues, who have gone for their families. But none of them have the practical knowledge of an experienced nurseryman or old gardener, and I wish to impress on your mind, that the first cultivators of nurseries of supply of all useful plants will be the most profitably employed for their own peculiar gain, and for the good of the public in general.

Respectfully, &c,

Indian Key, Fla

H. PERRINE.

*The above desultory remarks by Dr. Perrine, upon the climate of South Florida, and the establishment of the Tropical Plant Company, will, we believe, be read with considerable interest. The preparatory nursery for tropical plants has already been commenced by Dr. Perrine, in connection with his co-trustee, Mr. Howe, and the Morus multicaulis, with some tropical*

*plants, has already been extensively planted. We hope Dr. Perrine's efforts to establish an additional port of entry at Indian Key may prove successful, and that Congress, another session, will grant what the inhabitants of the Key so much require. When that shall be effected, we may look to the speedy formation of the Company for all the objects which Dr. Perrine has in view. In the mean time, we would urge cultivators and possessors of tropical fruits to forward to Dr. Perrine any seeds which they may think useful. We have, ourselves, a few seeds of the Phormium tenax, which we shall take the first opportunity to send to Indian Key. The only object of Dr. Perrine is, to introduce every useful plant into South Florida, with the sole hope of rendering the establishment of the Company a benefit to the whole country.—Ed.*