

## CHAPTER I

### ELDERBERRIES, COCOPLUMS AND CUSTARD APPLES

A weed is merely a plant out of place to some people. Anything is a weed to one who wants to plant something in place of it. A weed today may be valuable tomorrow to somebody. Some people think all wild things are weeds. All cultivated plants were of course once wild and some of them were weeds.

I have heard it said there is a wild *Solanum* or tomato-like plant which grows in Siam that yields a fruit which if regularly eaten prevents diabetes. If there is such a plant it is worth its weight in gold. We should import it anyway even on hearsay because the natives who eat it are remarkably free from this distressing disease. We should doctor ourselves anyway with food-medicines and every popular notion probably has some basis in fact. Even the tomato, peach and almond were once considered poisonous. The Chinese are still strong for ginseng and oldtimers well away from cities still have faith in many herbs carefully garnered from forest fastnesses.

Even the goldenrod may by selection become a tree in the Everglades and yield commercial rubber in case of need. They are talking also of a rubber yielding poinsettia, in fact many schemes except the use of our native and naturalized trees about which very little is really known.

Maybe when you kill the elderberry you destroy something worth more than the thing your are planting. The man who slays a hammock growth to plant tomatoes, with hundreds of acres of cleared land available anywhere needs a guardian especially if he bor-

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rows the money and loses as is often the case. Only those who know can succeed with plants. The man who trusts to luck rarely succeeds. Never more than two-thirds of the land should ever be bare of trees or bushes at any one time anyway, and these forested areas should be distributed as to location and size in such a way as to be of most service.

A man was cutting young live-oaks by the roadside. He said where he was from they were in the way. Tradition is one of the strongest forces in human nature. The forest was once the enemy of man and on the old seal of the territories west of the Ohio there is the motto "We have planted a better than the fallen." Old things and old customs are for a time forgotten but they are liable to appear in new form at any time. Even castor-oil, long famous as a lubricant and medicine, is now served in fancy mixtures with fancy names. It is now handed to us as **sodium ricinoleate** and heralded as one of the world's greatest detoxifiers. Years ago people in the Appalachian Region and other places were classed as crazy because they ate clay. Now they serve it in medicine under the name of colloidal kaolin. Like the common castor oil the elderberry will keep coming to the front.

We all knew it in boyhood when we manufactured pith-pop-guns. The elderberry fruit yields good wine, good jellies and pies, and that is about all grapes do. Men go to great expense to cultivate the grape and uproot the elderberry that grows in swampland of its own accord. The wild things should have their defenders at least until we have time to discover their uses.

A short time ago George Rector in the Saturday Evening Post sang the praises of the elderberry. He knows what people like to eat. He says that elderberry pie is one of the greatest of American delicacies. He says a healthy dash of vinegar squelches the slight bitterness and that an elderberry pie is to blueberry pie as cream is to skim-milk. This natural bitterness,

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however, may be tonic and I have often wondered if Indians or old settlers ever dried the elderberry as we do currants and grapes.

One of the greatest conquests of man is the ability to deal with the common things around him with sanity. The saying that "familiarity breeds contempt" dating back to Publius Syrus 42 B. C., fortunately has, like most oldtime saws, several of similar kind to completely offset it. There is a shocking irony anyway in words. They say mud mold and mother are all of the same root.

Most things that yield good wine have always received reverent attention from the hand of man. Not so with the elderberry which so far as I know has never been cultivated. The elderberry produces a wine as good as that yielded from grapes, in fact the goodness of old Port is no doubt mainly due to the elderberry juice which is added to give it distinctive flavor and color. In addition the elderberry has decided medicinal virtues. It could be used in soda fountains and be as popular as grape-juice.

The schools, the church, the courts, etc., are usually regarded as the pillars of civilization. This is no doubt so, but the main pillar is a full stomach. Without it other things fail. Man mainly needs shelter and food. Food, of course, includes drink, and foods and medicines often merge. These food-medicines may be stimulating or sedative or antiseptic. Elderberry is a combination food and medicine. Even the wild creatures instinctively search out plants that are healthful and shun those that are poisonous. Some plants are specific in their action like quinine. These seem to grow naturally in regions where they are most needed, quinine in the lands of malaria, chaulmugra in the lands of leprosy, chrysarobin in the lands of skin diseases. There is a greater search for a cure in such places. The chances of accidentally finding a cure are greater but the complete elimination of the malady never happens. This is due no doubt to incomplete application

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and imperfect technique. Need, however, conduces to search and experiment. Many great discoveries have been accomplished by untutored, primitive people. Invention is rare, discovery is common. Many years ago the natives of Central Africa took those suffering from paralysis into the lowlands where they contracted malaria, then they moved them back into the highlands and cured the malaria with bitter roots. There is very little that is really new. Mankind is repeating over and over again the same blunders. It is a process of see-saw through the ages with a little gained for each century.

The elderberry is one of the commonest plants in Florida. On the West Shore of Okeechobee there is a place on the map marked Elderberry. The tropical elderberry differs slightly from that which grows farther north. The northern species is *Sambucus canadensis*, the tropical species is *Sambucus intermedia*. The word *Sambucus* is Greek for some kind of a musical instrument in which the pithy stems were probably used. The ancient sambuke, however, was a stringed instrument the exact nature of which is not known. The elder *Sambucus nigra* grows to be a fair sized tree in Europe and is used by foresters. The dried flowers serve to flavor lard and the hard, compact wood for the manufacture of combs and other similar articles. The wood of the American species is hardly large enough for such purposes. The bark is cathartic and emetic, the flowers excitant and sudorific and the fruit juice is alterative and laxative. In the north the fruit bearing is seasonal, but in Florida it bears oftener. It grows in lowlands and its presence improves the soil. European foresters regard the elder as a cultural tree. There is no reason why it should not be planted for ornament as well as utility.

On Everglade muck there are three trees which Nature has handed us—the elderberry, the custard-apple and the cocoplum, all of which might be developed into species of great usefulness. A fine grade

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elderberry wine could be produced that might in time become famous like many of the cordials and bitters produced here and there throughout the world. It could be used as a coloring and flavor for drinks, ice cream and ices of various kinds.

Birds and other animals feed upon the berries and many people are fond of the flowers fried in butter. There is no need of educating the public to use it. It is a household word throughout this country. It grows wild by the thousands of acres in South Florida and the Seminoles like all Indians are expert berry pickers. They could supply elderberries by the ton.

There are people in the North who roam the woods for hours in search of a few quarts of elderberries. There are many people who always keep a bottle of elderberry wine tucked away in their cupboards to use in case of any kind of illness. In fact a lot of people would move to Florida to live if they knew that they could find elderberries in abundance at almost any time of the year.

Whenever the use of a thing has lasted through the ages there is usually a reason whether known or not. Many of these things were known to the Chinese and to our own Indians hundreds of years before the white man developed. The things that are near are probably just as useful as the products of distant parts. We imported storax from China for years and all the while had plenty of it in our own sweet-gum trees.

We should first learn the geography of our own backyards. The grape, the fig, the pomegranate and the olive have been venerated from the dawn of history. They have and still play an essential part in the lives of the peoples of the Mediterranean Region and now other parts of the world. Among our native things we may have substitutes quite the equal of these world famous trees. It is hard to predict what might or might not be done with such plants as the elderberry, custard apple or cocoplum. All three can no doubt be easily reproduced from cuttings. If cut-

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tings are used from specimens that produce the finest fruits always from the best trees and the best branches on the best trees they would gradually improve in fruit quality. Man has always instinctively improved fruit by saving and sowing the seeds of the fruits of the trees which he liked best. Just as soon as he moves them out of the wild the improvement begins.

It is marvellous how quickly tropical plants respond to the proper kind of treatment. They sicken and die with the same rapidity if improperly handled. Backyard trees flourish because they receive touches of attention from time to time—the cutting of a strangling vine, social birds that keep the bugs in check, a splash of water when they are wilted with thirst, a careful clipping of dying branches, the application of plant-foods of various kinds or a pile of rocks or rotting trash to shelter the roots from a burning sun. In the swamps they are on their own, not so much to fight each other as to fight the sun, the flood, the wind and fire. One of the commonest of these is the **cocoplum**. It grows on islands on the edge of the Everglades and forms a dense green foliage along the banks of streams. It grows in sand so close to the sea that its top is clipped by the blasts of salt and sand in times of storm. Protected from strong wind it forms a small but beautiful tree on almost any kind of soil. Some of the plums are white and some purple. In South America there is a golden fruited species which gives to the genus the name **Chrysobalanus** or golden acorn. The amount of flesh on the outside of the rather large seed is small but it has a flavor which is not repellant like several tropical fruits and is really refreshing when you are hungry and other better fruits are not at hand. They are highly esteemed by hungry Indian boys.

This fruit is native to the West Indies and Brazil and strange to say to the West Coast of Africa. There are more than one of these plants common to both shores of the Atlantic Ocean in the Tropics. It seems hardly likely that seeds could have been carried such

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long distances over salt water by natural means of plant distribution.

These fruits are excellent when cooked, producing an article of food equal to some of our Northern wild plum preserves. It belongs to the rose family and is closely related to the genus *Prunus* to which belong the true plums and cherries. Representatives of the rose family are conspicuous by their absence in the Tropics. The seed of the cocoplum contains a gummy matter which resembles chocolate and which according to old glade travellers is very nutritious and stimulating. Canova tells how when hunting Indians for ransom in the Glades for our proud and righteous government, the cocoplum fruit and kernel contents were a boon to the soldiers. He claimed that they accomplished a greater amount of strenuous work without fatigue when they could find an abundance of cocoplum fruits. This they learned from the very Indians they were out to capture.

Dr. Coker in his brochure on the vegetation of the Bahaman Islands, says that it was a favorite fruit with the Carib Indians. The seeds are very oily and Sargent says that strung on sticks they were used as candles by the natives. It might pay to extract the oil. It might be like almond oil which is used in pharmacy and soap manufacture. The fruit is a favorite conserve in Spanish-American countries and is sometimes exported from Cuba and Mexico. The fruit could be easily improved by a process of selection and the oil in the kernels should be extracted and tested. The **sea-grape** is being successfully used as an ornamental. The same would apply to the cocoplum with equal success. It served the early settlers and should also serve us. There is also a **West-Indian-cherry** in our hammocks which is a very beautiful tree. It bears cherries and like the cocoplum is worthy of special attention by nurserymen.

The specific name of the cocoplum is *icaco* an old Indian or Portuguese word. It means monkey face

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and no doubt has reference to the wrinkled appearance of the skin of the fruit. It may be the same word from which coco comes. Oviedo, an early Spanish traveller, says: "The skin of the fruit has some resemblance to that of a monkey's face; for, no matter how young a monkey is, it seems old because of its wrinkles and likewise the 'hicaco' fruit. No matter how fresh it may be it is always full of wrinkles."

A friend of mine when he first tasted cocoplum fruit likened it to a mixture of soapsuds and cotton. The worst you can say about it is that it is sweetish and insipid. It has no bad odor or poisonous quality to overcome as with several of our commonest fruits. I have eaten cocoplums which compared in flavor with huckleberries. Many of these wild trees are of interest because of a close helpful association with mankind through the ages, especially in early days when his struggle with the wild was intense and not always successful. Many wild animals, especially wild swine find in these cocoplums an abundance of rich food. The word enters into place names here and there, such as Cocoplum Beach and on the north shore of Cuba Punto Icacos.

In this Everglade area, especially around Lake Okeechobee, there is another common tree called the custard-apple. This like the cocoplum also grows on the West Coast of Africa and throughout the Antillean area but nowhere has it greater development than in this particular region. Although tropical it reaches maximal growth on the warm side of Lake Okeechobee. In the early days Pelican Bay, bordered by custard apple, draped in moon vines, was a site of charming beauty and natural solitude. Before these trees were cut this shore of the lake was a dense, strange forest of custard apples fifty feet in height. Their trunks were gnarled and crooked, sometimes swollen and fluted and brace roots projected above the mud, as is common with trees that grow in flooded areas. It was a mysterious tropical forest which has been gradually



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passing to furnish soil for vegetable crops in winter. The raccoons always wash their food so they carried the seeds from swamp to lake shore. The birds that lived on the fish in the lake roosted in the branches and dropped to the ground the refuse of their meals. It was not only the former, reclamer and consolidator of muddy soils; it was the home of many creatures that constituted the wierd association of living things commonly called the **Custard-apple-bottoms**.

This tree belongs to the famous **Annona** family. **Annona** is probably the same as anana the Spanish for pineapple. The word is probably of Indian origin. The custard-apple is a sister to the famous cherimoya and the guanabana or sour-sop. Sour-sop by the way is a very tough name for one of the most excellent of all tropical fruits. **Annona glabra** is the scientific name of the custard apple, also called pond apple, monkey apple, alligator apple and other similar names. The word **glabra** means smooth and refers no doubt to the smoothness of the fruit or possibly also of the leaves. The fruit is large, abundant and attractive but hardly in its wild state fit to eat. It might in time be developed into a very valuable fruit. In the West Indies the tree is called the corkwood, arbol de corcho, palo de corcho, and has reference to the lightness of its wood which is used for net floats and bottle corks. This is one of the lightest of woods, while **Floridan-ironwood** is one of the heaviest if not the heaviest of all woods. The wood might be used for insulating purposes in place of cork but the great function of the tree is in the consolidation and enrichment of wet mucky land. Some claim that the custard apple is on soil that was always good, that it grew with great luxuriance in that special district because of the pristine richness of the land. It is in my opinion the cause and not the consequence.

Not far from this great forest in early days there were extensive Indian settlements. Early Spanish writers refer to cities on the shores of Okeechobee. It

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is quite possible that the Indian may have encouraged its growth not only for its wood and fruits but for the animals that would seek the shelter. Although the fruit is insipid to the white man who has many to choose from it may have been not only palatable to the Indian but a necessary food in his diet. Yellow fruits contain valuable vitamins and in a diet consisting mostly of fish and meat, fruits of almost any kind would be welcome. There are evidences that many things were happening on the shores of Okeechobee long before the white man landed. The Caloosahatchie, which drains from the lake into the Gulf, was the river of the Calusa. They found ample food of one kind around the lake while the river led to the great clam and oyster banks on the Gulf shore, where they were benefitted by the salt air and salt containing iodine and other minerals essential to health. There are broken pots, kitchen refuse, shell heaps, burial and council mounds and other evidences that indicate that this region from the lake to the Gulf was a favorite homeland of aboriginal peoples.

Later it became a favorite hiding place for renegades of many kinds. Then finally it developed into one of the world's greatest winter vegetable sections. In these changes throughout the ages the elderberry, cocoplum and custard apple have played an important part in many ways. They were the forerunners that reclaimed it from the useless wild for the service of man. They may be needed again to bring it back where it belongs.

There is a sort of tradition that unless trees yield excellent wood they are of little value. Among tropical trees wood is not always the major product. Rubber and such things are always a close second. Where trees, however, consolidate the soil, check erosion, collect dew, beautify the landscape, break the force of the wind or have other indirect beneficial effects, their value cannot be measured in money. Were it not for these beneficial effects in serving as a

protective blanket over the face of the earth forestry would be on the same level with coal and iron. The real reason for communal concern in the forest is due to the effect it has in yielding benefits of many kinds of importance to all of us like any other social welfare work. If properly practiced forestry yields continuous remuneration to labor, furnishes raw materials for industry and at the same time restrains the destructive forces of Nature.

Although the wood of the trees I have just mentioned is not of much value and although the fruits of these trees may not compare with highly cultivated fruits, these forests shelter and feed many creatures of the swamps and glades and are at the same time continuously working for soil-betterment. They prepare the way for other things and therefore have a silvicultural value far beyond the value of their products. This stretch of mucky land is often referred to as our sugar bowl. Convert all of it into a cane patch and you will have large corporate interests dictating the politics and policies of this whole area. They would fix the level of the watertable to suit their own desires and although it would furnish labor it would also furnish labor-trouble, and all that it entails. There is a big difference whether you are working for or with the other fellow. The lands of sugar and rum are rarely imbued with peace and contentment. In some instances the tropical native has been impregnated with too much recreational social uplift and in other instances has been dangerously influenced by agents of the Third Internationale. The promoters of big plantations rarely regard the rights of the rest of us. The peon is the man who walks; he uses a machete for a cane but can wield it with force and accuracy if so inclined.