

# ADVENTURES OF PLANT BOY

As someone who has entered the golden years of life, I find quiet walks in the garden to be inspiring. Perhaps it's the knowledge that the time is nearing for me to join God in whatever version of the Garden of Eden that's now growing in heaven. Perhaps it's that my mind no longer has room for the clutter of inane and useless information. Or maybe it's that, as I reflect on the names of plants, I find that so many of the people they named plants after died at an age that I have long passed thanks to modern medicine. It's probably all the above, in one way or another, affecting my walks these days.

While I enjoy walking through my own garden, with its unique satisfying quality, I also like strolling through all kinds of botanical gardens. The trail today brings out numerous memories of youthful encounters with the plant world. Of course, as a youth, those encounters lacked the mature appreciation of the significance of all that surrounded me. They were just part of growing up as 'Plant Boy'.

As I round the first turn in the garden path today, I come across an old, large *Ficus benghalensis* tree. With its huge prop roots and thick horizontal branching, it is like a mansion for tree climbing. While I would never dream of climbing it today, I couldn't help but lift the veil of age and open the cover to 'The Adventures of Plant Boy' when the massive tree came into view.

We didn't have a banyan tree in our front yard, but we did have a one-room Ficus tree of some sort. Of course, I can't tell you the exact species, because Plant Boy had more important things to attend to than learning the exact scientific name at the time. A big old tree proved sufficient knowledge for the moment. Its limbs were just large enough for hours of comfortable seating and strategic placement of plastic army men, cowboys, or Indians. I had a good view of the neighborhood and could do my surveillance without being seen, as the limbs were always filled with thick foliage. It was on a Tuesday, I believe, that I spotted the mailman coming down the sidewalk. I immediately went into quiet mode and remained absolutely motionless. As he walked under the tree, he said, "Hi

ya, Mark.” I made a mental note to rethink my position, but quickly forgot any notion to do so.

Later that afternoon, my buddies and I met in front of a neighbor’s Ixora hedge. In the never-ending battle to protect the neighborhood and our families, we sometimes needed instant energy. We would pull an Ixora flower apart and suck off the sweet nectar from inside so we could continue the battle refortified.

They were everywhere—in the neighborhood, at the elementary school, at church, at the grocery store, probably left by aliens from Mars. Of course, we lived in South Florida and the plant I’m referring to is the croton, later learned to be *Codiaeum variegatum*. I always liked the color and pattern of the leaves, at least as much as a kid could. When the dreaded time for science projects came around in school, I did one on the pigments in the croton leaf. When the science fair ended, I found that I had actually enjoyed the project, though I obviously could not admit it. One day, I watched my dad doing something to a branch of the croton in our backyard. Perhaps he was performing some kind of surgery, I don’t know. He took a knife and scraped an area around the bark. Then he wrapped some kind of wiry looking stuff around

the area that he had scraped. After that, he wrapped the area with aluminum foil from our kitchen. Whatever he did must not have been successful, because a month or two later he had to amputate the branch. I didn't quite understand why as the branch always looked healthy. My partner, Jeff, said he heard his parents talking one night, and it sounded like the plant had caught a disease from France—marcottage or something like that. But I don't recall the plant ever leaving the backyard. Jeff had a reputation for stretching the truth.

Another kid in the neighborhood had an interesting tree in his backyard that we would often sit under and discuss security strategy. Sometimes these meetings would get boring, as most meetings today still are. When we really got bored, we'd pick up the fallen fruit capsules and squeeze them. They would then go pop and release a little liquid. I suppose it was a messy tree, but the popping sound of the fruit in our hands had a therapeutic effect on our weary minds.

Stretching the length of our backyard on one side, a thick hedge produced these round, kind of ridged cherry-like fruit. My friend, Jeff, claimed the fruit contained a deadly poison and a mere brief touch to the lips would send you into a frozen-like

state that you'd never wake from. When you're a kid, it can seem confusing to glean the truth from everything being said—especially from Jeff. However, I heeded Jeff's warning (we were partners in a dangerous world), and I never touched the fruit. That belief remained in effect until I saw my father pick one fruit and eat it. He didn't fall into a frozen state. He ate seven more and survived for another twenty years. Jeff's credibility grew weaker with me, but we still fought many neighborhood battles together. I later learned this cherry-like plant came from this country called Surinam. Picked too soon and they gave you good pucker power. Picked when they were dark red or almost purple and they were sweet. My mother made a marmalade from them. With such new-found knowledge, the hedge became another oasis for quick nourishment during our neighborhood patrols.

We lived in an older area of town, actually right next to an air force base. I spent many a night looking out my bedroom window watching the green strobe light on top of the base water tower. We were pretty naïve, I guess, about all the plants around us that were invading our portion of the earth. Well, I was naïve for sure, but I'm not sure what that meant. The list of plants now considered

invasive abounded where we lived. Australian Pines made nearly impenetrable borders. I actually grew some in one of my first business projects. The Melaleuca trees on our neighbor's lot had cool bark, and we frequently pulled off little strips for some make-believe activity. After watching tv and hearing about all the holly at Christmas time, I presented my mom with a homemade wreath of Florida Holly or Brazilian Pepper. It only lasted about two days, and it took about that long to get all the sap off my hands.

We had a large coconut tree in our backyard. Benny Wilson dared me to climb it one day. I took him up on the dare and climbed high enough to touch the coconuts. I never climbed another coconut tree in short pants. It always had plenty of coconuts on it and I never had one fall on my head, at least not that I can remember, and I probably would have remembered something like that. I suppose guardian angels for little boys must get in a lot of overtime pay. Occasionally, the gang would take the husk off a coconut and poke holes in the eyes at the top so we could drink the coconut milk. I never found it that appealing, but it was always good to know we had another survival tool.

When summer came around, I got to ride out to the sod farm with my uncle in the semi. When the forklift operator, I think his name was Stanley, finished loading the truck, he walked over to some bushes growing by the ditch. He picked off some purple berries and offered me some. I declined, but my uncle took them gratefully. I guess I still had Jeff's warnings in my head, because I waited to see if either of them dropped dead first. When they didn't, I had my first taste of wild elderberries. They were pretty sweet and once again added to my survival knowledge.

My dad did a lot of experimenting with gardening. One year he made a deal with the local concrete company to dump their leftover concrete at our nursery and save the dump fees. He always had a form ready to pour when they pulled in. Dad built some small square concrete bins with each one having a drain and a water faucet. He put container plants in them and when it came time to water, he closed the drain and opened the faucet allowing the plants inside to absorb water as they needed and then he opened the drain and let the remaining water out. Before putting ornamental plants in them, he experimented with rutabagas in pots. The rutabagas grew like crazy and despite giving away all

that we could, we got sick of eating rutabagas (even dad).

We had a large White Bird of Paradise, *Strelitzia nicolai*, outside our backdoor. When we weren't being dive-bombed, we enjoyed watching the local mockingbird use the boats of the Bird of Paradise as his personal watering hole.

The elderly woman down the street loved to garden. Sometimes during the summer or on weekends she would hire me to help with gardening for the princely sum of five cents per hour. What did I know, I was just a kid, and it was better than planting spinach at home for nothing. She had a *Plumeria* tree in her front yard with red flowers. I always thought she was pulling my leg when she called it a Frangipani. It sounded like something some kid in the neighborhood would call it just for fun. It did kind of roll off the tongue with a little practice. She was happy with my work, and I was happy to have a little money to buy more baseball cards. Isn't that what the free market is all about?

Speaking of rolling off the tongue, I always had a hard time pronouncing "avocado". It would come out as abra cadabra, abrel cabalado, or any of a dozen other ways. I'm proud to say I can properly pronounce it today.



The more I read *The Adventures of Plant Boy* in my mind, the more I realized how many things I hadn't thought about in over fifty years. I hope this little peek into the youthful encounters of a small boy will give you reason to grab a cold lemonade, sit under a shade tree in your garden, and recall your own youthful adventures.