

# RARE TREES DISCOVERED

by Kathy L. Wolf

On May 15, 1981 I paused at my office desk to look out over a familiar scene. Beyond the parking lot lay the Key West Golf Course. More than once, this view had invited me to leave behind the stacks of paperwork. What was unique about May 15? On this morning I was introduced to the largest stand of satinwood trees (*Zanthoxylum flavum*) in the Florida Keys!

*Zanthoxylum flavum* is known by several common names including yellowwood, satinwood, and yellow-heart. All these names refer to the appearance of the cured wood when used in woodworking. The tree is very rare. Only two specimens have been recorded in the Florida Keys (and the state): one at Bahia Honda Key and the other in the Marquesas Keys. The species is dioecious. Each of the recorded trees is unable to bear seed preventing any possible increase in the number of individuals. Foliage is dark green to yellow in color. Leaves are alternate and pinnately compound, having five to nine ovate leaflets. The distinguishing characteristic of the tree is the "windows" in the leaflets. Daniel B. Ward (Volume Five of the Rare and Endangered Biota of Florida Series) describes these as scattered "minute, translucent, glandular areas .... which are very evident when the leaf is held up to the light."

A cluster of satinwood was discovered in the spring of 1981 in Key West. Members of a CETA landscaping class took trips around Key West to learn native and ornamental plants. They found a tree that appeared to be a Jamaica dogwood (*Piscidia piscipula*), but closer inspection showed that this tree was a little different. The students consulted the County Extension Service agent who did not recognize the plant. He, in turn, showed the plant to Mrs. Lois Kitching, an amateur botanist. Kitching suspected the tree was a satinwood, and on May 15 she returned with information to confirm her idea. I happened to be looking out at the view as Lois was literally jumping for joy at the find. How many times had I looked at that tree, not noticing the uniqueness of it?

Word soon went out and local botanists came to search for more trees. On July 18 a thorough search of



Detail of Satinwood tree

the golf course was conducted by Lois Kitching, George Avery, J. Paul Scurlock, and the author. Seventeen trees were located and marked! More have been discovered since. The trees are scattered over the area of a 50 yard radius circle and range in height from two to twenty feet. Soon after the discovery the trees bloomed. Both sexes produced terminal pyramidal clusters of minute flowers, and seed promptly appeared on the female plants. Kitching collected seeds and planted them with good results; a year later she has about 20 small plants from the 600 sown seeds.

What is the future for the trees? In April of 1981 the City of Key West sold the golf course to a development firm. Plans include condominiums and course improvements. A look at the plans show that one tree must be moved, the others will not be damaged or removed. The developers have agreed to replant the tree in the Key West Botanical Garden, a preserve for native and unusual ornamental plants.

It appears that this discovery of *Zanthoxylum flavum* is one exception to the all-too-common obliteration of isolated plant populations. The trees will remain in an area dedicated to recreational uses so will be protected. They are also a reproducing population, thus the trees can be introduced into other public plantings or may even be spread by natural agents.

The discovery provides a useful lesson. Often in our daily haste we miss the details of our surroundings. The familiar escapes our attention. Closer scrutiny of our immediate environment can result in the discovery — and possible protection — of rare native plants.

"Those who do not know the rainy season do not know Florida. Dawn is short in these latitudes. Each sunrise is now a morning of supernal beauty, the sky a fairy tale, the landscape and gardens a love poem. No cloud is to be seen. Until 9 o'clock there is scarcely a breeze, and the air is oppressively hot. But suddenly there comes a cool wisp of wind, and yet another. Then a mighty breath begins to blow — the breath of the ocean. There is no indication of rain. The sky is still clear, but the breeze blows steadily now. Of a sudden a few low-hanging clouds come sweeping rapidly towards us. The clouds increase in size and depth of color until in a short time the entire sky is shrouded by a dark veil. The thunder rolls. The air is saturated with electricity. In the east we see a great white wall approaching slowly. An immense, moving mass, it comes nearer and nearer — a cataract of water. Such a rain is totally unlike a northern rain. It is a deluge. Sheets of water descend, and no umbrella will protect us. The drops are enormous. The roar of falling rain is such that people cannot hear each other without shouting. When accompanied by high winds, only the stanchest houses seem able to keep out the downpour. Others leak on all sides, as the rain seems to come from every direction. Objects a short distance away are invisible behind the heavy curtain of water. In an hour it is over. The sun shines again, the sandy soil is almost dry, and the air is cool and aromatic. We breathe deeply and haste out to enquire of our garden friends how they fared in the storm.

"During the dry season almost all plants seem to be at a stand-still. But what a change after the first rains have fallen! The plants start into growth again as though touched by magic."

• Dr. Henry Nehrling

(Ed. note: This is not a hurricane Dr. Nehrling is describing, but those of you who have lived here only during the past twenty years of Florida's "drought" may never have witnessed these daily summer rains.)

