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Maria La Yacona

Cover: 'Leaves of Fire' - a fine example of Jamaica's colourful foliage plants. John Rashford's fascinating article on the plant and practices associated with it begins on p. 19.

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Leaves of Fire

Jamaica's Crotons



Crotons and a warm smile often greet visitors to a Jamaican homestead.

Text and illustrations by
JOHN RASHFORD

*Of the many plants Jamaicans appreciate for their beauty, none is more popular, widespread or culturally important than the croton *Codiaeum variegatum*.*

THIS NATIVE OF THE OLD WORLD TROPICS is an extraordinary ornamental shrub or small tree whose outstanding feature is its variegated, brilliantly coloured leaves which grow in a variety of unusual shapes. With its 'leaves of fire', this is, without a doubt, one of the world's most beautiful foliage plants. Many varieties abound in Jamaica, where they are put to interesting uses.

The croton is a member of the spurge family, Euphorbiaceae. This is one of the largest and most important families of plants in the tropical and subtropical regions of the world containing some 300 genera divided into about 5,000 species. It includes familiar plants such as the cassava (*Manihot esculenta*) and castor oil (*Ricinus communis*) as well as common ornamentals useful for their attractive leaves – copper leaf (*Acalypha wilkesiana*, *Euphor-*

bia cotinifolia) and snowflake (*Breynia nivosa*); beautiful flowers – peregrina (*Jatropha hastata*), coral plant (*Jatropha multifida*), crown of thorns (*Euphorbia milii*) and cat tail (*Acalypha hispida*); colourful bracts – poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*), snowball (*Euphorbia leucocephala*) and wild physic nut (*Euphorbia punicea*); unusual shapes – roast pork or candelabra tree (*Euphorbia lactea*), and, for a combination of these factors – monkey fiddle (*Pedilanthus tithymaloides*).

The croton as an Old World plant is often attributed to the East Indies in general, and more specifically to Malaya, Australia and the Pacific Islands. According to Morton [1977:69], the wild representatives of *Codiaeum variegatum* have green leaves, and they occur from Fiji to Australia. The cultivation of the colourful varieties, she points out, 'began in the Moluccas and has spread to all tropical

and subtropical areas and northern conservatories'. The croton has also spread to nurseries in temperate latitudes where it is sold as a potted plant suitable for home and office.

The striking beauty of the croton is its colourful, alternate, simple leaves which remain attractive throughout the year. These conspicuous oval, linear or lobed leaves can be small or large, and are usually thick and leathery; they can be flat, curved, twisted or spiraled and are brilliantly variegated with striped, streaked, blotched, dappled, spotted or speckled markings of green, white, yellow, orange, pink, red or bronze. From the axils of the upper leaves develop relatively long, solitary or paired spikes that bear inconspicuous male or female

This is one of an occasional series by John Rashford on plants and the spirit world in Jamaica. Previous articles on the subject covered the John Crow Bead (17:2), The Cotton Tree (18:1), and the Calabash (21:3).

flowers on the same plant. From these flowers develop small, round capsular fruits.

JAMAICAN USES Gardens

In Jamaica, as elsewhere around the world, perhaps the most important use of plants in structuring the environment around a dwelling is in the creation of borders. Borders serve as boundary markers separating the yard from what lies beyond it; they help to define paths, walks and driveways, pointing out the way and directing movement; they are used to frame trees, shrubs or ornamental beds that often rise like islands from a sea of grass when placed in the centre of a lawn; they occur along the foundation of buildings – usually at the front but sometimes all around the building; they provide protection in one way or another as barriers and screens; and they are created just for their beauty. The croton is one of the most important border plants in Jamaica. This is especially true of boundary markers and borders to the path from the gate to the entrance of the house.



Croton borders are often the most beautiful aspect of Jamaican gardens. As one drives around the island, these colourful borders set against a background of green are often the first signs of a house or district in the distance. In many cases they are also the first sign advertising a roadside stand, stall or small shop where fruits, cooked food, shells, carvings and curios are sold.

There are three basic methods of using crotons as a border or hedge. The first, which is relatively rare, consists of planting only one variety of croton. This makes a uniform hedge that is very attractive, especially along fences of cut stones, cement blocks, wood or wire. Other plants that are used in a similar way should be mentioned here. The red hibiscus (*Hibiscus rosa-inensis*), for example, is the one most commonly planted hedge throughout rural Jamaica,



and it is seldom found mixed with the pink, white or yellow varieties. In Kingston, many hedges are planted with a single variety of bougainvillea, although mixed varieties are also common. Protective ornamental borders – borders that are meant to serve as a barrier – are also planted in single varieties, often using such plants as bread-and-cheese (*Pithecolobium unguis-cati*), century plant (*Agave* spp.), roast pork (*Euphorbia lactea*), dildo (*Cereus peruvianus*), pingwing (*Bromelia pinguin*) and Jerusalem thorn (*Parkinsonia aculeata*).

The second major type of croton border is created by a random or systematic interplanting of two or more varieties. In fact, growing this species seems to encourage Jamaicans to find as many varieties as they can, fostering the development of borders of mixed varieties. This tendency is also encouraged by influential gardeners such as Webster [1965:96] who writes: 'An attractive fashion of specimen planting is that of cultivating broad-leafed and linear-leafed varieties so close together that the latter give the group a fluffy, tessellated appearance.' This effort to 'collect crotons' is probably the reason why croton hedges of only one variety are uncommon. Other species planted in two or more varieties include the copper leaf (*Acalypha wilkesiana*), June rose (*Lagerstroemia speciosa*), Barbados pride (*Poinciana pulcherrima*) and bougainvillea (*Bougainvillea* spp.).

The third method of using crotons is found in one of the most complex kinds of borders. It consists of one or more varieties of croton planted with one or more other species, sometimes including their varieties also. This type of mixed border is, I believe, the most common and the most colourful to be found in Jamaica.

In addition to the plants already mentioned, these mixed borders commonly include flowering plants such as bullfoot orchids or butterfly flowers (*Bauhinia* spp.), ixoras (*Ixora* spp.),

oleanders (*Nerium oleander*), allamandas (*Allamanda* spp.), morning glory (*Ipomoea fistulosa*), canna lilies (*Canna indica*), cat tail (*Acalypha hispida*), sleeping or pepper hibiscus (*Malvaviscus arboreus*), and the shower or pot of gold (*Thryallis glauca*).

They can also include foliage plants such as the copper leaf (*Acalypha* spp.), *Euphorbia cotinifolia*, fresh-cut (*Graptophyllum* spp.), dragon-blood (*Cordyline terminalis*), agave (*Agave* spp.), dieffenbachias (*Dieffenbachia* spp.), and aralias (*Polyscias* spp.). Natural processes also contribute to the variety and, in some cases, the beauty and usefulness of Jamaica's mixed borders, for wild plants such as johncrow bead (*Abrus precatorius*), bleeding heart (*Antigonon leptopus*), cerasee (*Momordica charantia*), blue pea (*Clitoria ternatea*), and love bush (*Cuscuta* spp.) are frequently part of the composition, especially where there is neglect.

In addition to borders, the croton also occurs in gardens in groupings or as individual specimens. It is commonly used as a 'doorstep plant' – a plant portal through which one passes on entering many Jamaican homes. It is also grown as an indoor or outdoor container plant placed by doorsteps and on



window sills, verandas, patios and terraces. In the yard, potted crotons are especially common along pathways or under trees.

Decoration

The leaves and branches of the croton are of ornamental value for indoor and outdoor decoration. In rural areas, many outdoor occasions involve the construction of temporary bamboo structures decorated with flowers and leaves, including croton branches. This plant is a silent witness to many festivities and functions. Vases of croton leaves and branches are also used for decoration. This is one important way

in which the plant can be propagated. The leaf or branch will grow when kept in a vase and from there can be simply planted out. Leaves and branches are also used in more elaborately designed floral arrangements. A good illustration of such an arrangement, prominently featuring crotons, was presented in *The Flower Gardener* published by the Jamaica Agricultural Society [1964:188]. It is not difficult in Jamaica to find many excellent arrangements of this kind. On 28 and 29 May 1988, for example, the St Andrew's Scots Kirk (United Church of Jamaica and Grand Cayman) celebrated its 175th anniversary with a 'Flower Festival' with the theme 'The Burning-Bush'. Although the croton was not



chosen to symbolize this theme, several of the thirty floral arrangements listed in the programme included crotons.

Graves

In the early nineteenth century, Matthew Lewis [1834:97] noted that African Jamaicans 'are always buried in their own gardens' and towards the end of the century, Rampini [1873:86] observed that 'there is something almost poetical in the (African Jamaican) . . . custom of burying their dead in the little yards attached to their huts, underneath the coffee tree and the bananas which they had worked at during their lives'. What Lewis and Rampini failed to report is that while graves were often in gardens, their precise location was usually marked by growing crotons which also served as grave decorations. Beckwith [1927:76] noted this fact, and when she went to visit a Kumina group at Cave Heap, not far from Richmond, St Mary, her guide, Wilfrid, pointed out to her a 'graveyard, planted with crotons' [1927:178].

Although not a common practice today, this use of the croton is well known in Jamaica and is one of the most interesting ways in which the



plant is of cultural value. The croton is not the only plant so used, however, for there are similar reports of the dragon's blood (*Cordyline terminalis*), calabash tree (*Crescentia cujete*) and the lady or queen-of-the-night jasmine (*Cestrum nocturnum*). What these plants share in common is that they are all conspicuous in some way: The calabash tree has large round fruits hanging from its trunk and old branches, the dragon's blood and the croton have variegated leaves of very bright colors, and the jasmine produces a very powerful fragrance. Several people told me they would not plant the croton in their garden or use its leaves and branches for decorations because of its association with graves. The same was said of the calabash and the queen-of-the-night. This is understandable; things associated with graves and graveyards in Jamaica's folk tradition are considered spiritually potent and are sometimes used in rituals aimed at controlling spirits. This is evident in Jamaican folklore as Beckwith [1929:109,136] and others have made clear.

Religion

The croton plays a part in Jamaica's traditional religious practices. Many of the studies of Revival, Pocomania and Kumina groups, note that 'flowers' and 'leaves' were always used decoratively and ceremonially. Unfortunately, they rarely, if ever, specify the plants involved [Hogg 1964; Simpson 1980; Seaga 1969]. A good example is Simpson and Moore [1980:170] who write:

leaves. . . have an important place in Jamaican revivalist cults. Jars and vases filled with leaves, as well as vessels containing flowers, are found on altars and altar tables during services and at all other times. Branches with leaves appear on church banners, placards, and wall inscriptions. In the same way that white clothing and white candles symbolize purity, certain types of leaves serve as symbols of health, strength, and well-

being. In addition to their symbolic significance, the leaves are used extensively in healing and in conjuring.

One author who mentions specific plants used in traditional religious practices is Senior [1983:47] who notes, 'Revivalists . . . consider the croton as an indispensable part of their church decoration, especially the "Jerusalem" variety'.

Another more substantial account of the ritual use of the croton is that of Ryman [1984:102-3] who offers an excellent description of the Kumina 'booth' and 'table':

In the construction of the booth, the placement of the posts carries symbolic meaning. Four of the posts are specifically placed on the outside at the four points of the earth – north, south, east and west – and usually have candles placed at their base. The centre pole, of singular importance, is far more elaborately 'dressed' in accordance with the purpose of the Kumina play. The pole, appropriately wrapped in cloth of specific colours and at whose base the Kumina table is set, harnesses the vital life forces of the earth and makes them available to the 'skilled' and 'gifted' Ritual Specialist. Hence the *nkisi* or ritual paraphernalia which include candles, drinks for the ancestors, powerful 'weeds' like crotons [my emphasis]; the drums, support instruments and musicians; the lead singers and dancers and Ritual Specialists are all concentrated in this area.

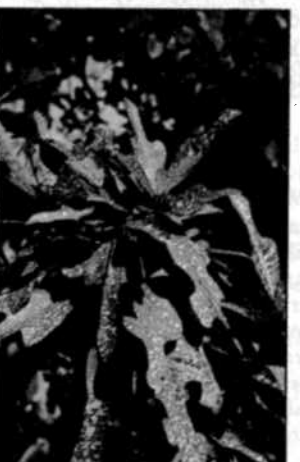
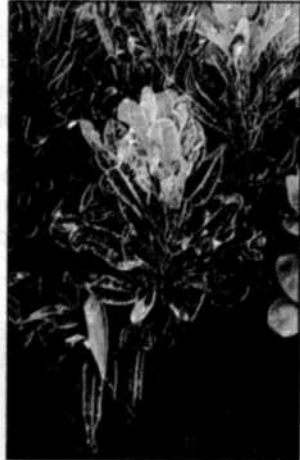
Ryman goes on to explain that each item of ritual paraphernalia surrounding the 'maypole' or any other type of centre pole carries its own significance in relation to the particular 'table' being set:

Dry coconut or *kandi*, sugar and water or *swigidi langu*, white rum, water, cream soda and other types of soft drinks, wine or any type of alcoholic drink known to be the favourite of an anticipated *nkuyu* visitor, candles, 'weeds' – 'Jeremiah croton', 'leaf of life' and rice are common *nkisi* seen on a Kumina ground table. They collectively function to invoke, feed and refresh the spirits and to control them, to 'cut evil' or destruction, to heal, and, to transmit the Power.

Ryman's [1984:103] discussion indicates that the use of the croton is more







Some Jamaican crotons.

than simple decoration; it plays an important part in the belief and practices of Kumina.

Another indication of the croton's ritual importance comes from an article by Seaga [1955:72-73] on Jamaica's traditional healing practices which mentions the use of the croton in 'divination'. He reports that for those he studied, 'diagnostic methods are based on the assumption that both material and non-material worlds are capable of relaying messages from the spirit world'. He goes on to note:

A typical example here is the 'reading' of a leaf. In this operation, the polka-dot, multi-coloured leaf of 'Jeremiah' croton is most popular. The reader concentrates his vision on these spots until they first become blurred and then separate into real and virtual components. The virtual component is believed to have been separated from the real by the spirit, and during the process of this separation the message it carries is instantaneously impressed upon the reader.

The same method, he tells us, 'can be used for "reading" the flame of a candle, a glass of water (with a coin in it and a light nearby for reflection), the sun, moon, stars, or sign characters'.¹

DISPERSAL

In addition to the unusual appearance of its remarkably beautiful leaves, there are two primary reasons why the croton has become one of the most familiar plants in the Jamaican landscape. The first is clearly related to the characteristics of the plant itself: the croton lives a long time and is relatively easy to manage. It is easily propagated by air layering and grows readily from leaves or cuttings which are easy to obtain either free or at minimal cost. It grows readily, although not too quickly, and is capable of withstanding droughts that are not excessive. The croton thrives in a variety of soil and light conditions and does well along the coast. It tolerates regular pruning or clipping and, although it falls prey to many pests such as scales of many species, thrips, mealybugs, red spiders, mites and root-rot, it is a hardy plant that is fairly resistant to disease.

The other reason for the widespread dispersal of the croton in Jamaica is clearly related to the crucial role the island's botanic gardens have played. In the late nineteenth century, the report of the Superintendent of Hope Garden

[cited in Fawcett, 1887:2] indicated that there were 'about forty varieties of crotons' in the gardens. When I visited Castleton in August 1988, Roy Bennett, a guide at the garden, said there were 'over fifty varieties' there. While I did not make a count, it was clear that there were many varieties, several of which I had never seen before. Crotons

sale of which was in support of the Bustamante Hospital for Children. As I entered, I wondered whether the croton would be a part of any of the works presented. I was not disappointed; one of the exhibits was a painting titled *Hibiscus, Caladium and Crotons* by Eric Smith, whom the catalogue described as a 'popular landscape artist'. It is obvi-

CROTON DISPERSAL IN JAMAICA, 1888-1894

Year ¹	Garden	All Plants ² Dispersed	Crotons ³ Sold	Given Free	Given in Exchange	Received	Sent ⁴
1888	Castleton	22,326	1,065	S(3,986)	S(4,305)	1	
1889	Hope	10,272	973	S(902)	S(397)	H(1,171)	
1890	Castleton	10,712	S(893)				H 167
1890	Hope	24,238	1,189	58	S(927)	S(10,712) CS(10,712)	
1892	Castleton	29,956	247				H850/E190 K 130
1892	Hope	52,787	2,318	S(15,888)	S(12,263)	C 272	
1892	Hope	33,319	2,035	S(791)	S(791)		
1893 ^a	Castleton	16,761	S(1,306)				H 662
1893 ^b	Hope	27,049	2,399	S(4,470)			
1894	Castleton	11,362	670				H43

NOTES: (1) The year of the annual report. (2) All plants dispersed from the garden for the year in question. (3) 'S' before a number in parentheses indicates that the croton was one of several other categories of plants that were grouped together under 'ornamental', 'miscellaneous shrubs and trees' etc. (4) Where plants have been 'sent' to other locations, 'H' is Hope Gardens, 'E' is Exhibition Grounds and 'K' is King's House Garden.

have been dispersed from Jamaica's botanic gardens by sale, exchange and free gifts.

The table above presents data compiled from the annual reports of William Fawcett who was then the director of Public Gardens and Plantations.

From the information provided, it is clear that the botanic gardens played a significant part in the dispersal of crotons in Jamaica, probably far more extensive than indicated in the table.

Since Fawcett's presentation of data was not systematic in format, in the categories used, or in the details presented, it is difficult to offer a truly accurate picture.

CONCLUSIONS

On 4 June 1988, I went to the Jamaica Pegasus Hotel in Kingston to view an exhibition of Jamaican art, the

ous that the croton is one of Jamaica's most fascinating ornamental plants, and it is certainly at the top of the list of the many plants appreciated for their beautiful foliage. This is evident in its appearance in works of art; its use in room or yard decorations and in vases and floral arrangements; its cultivation on graves and in ornamental gardens, and its significance in Jamaica's religious traditions and folklore. Despite its obvious importance, however, it is surprising how little we really know about the cultural significance of this most familiar of Jamaican plants.

Note

1. We should note here the tendency of Jamaicans to 'read' almost everything: bodily experiences - sneezing, dancing eyes, burning or ringing ears, twitching or trembling lips, and itchy nostrils, knees, feet, elbow or hands; physical characteristics - small or large ears, moles and where they occur, open teeth, a bald head or hair extended down the forehead to a point, white spots on fin-

gernails and the quality of a person's voice; the behaviour of birds – the john-crow, owl, hawk, swallow, pond coot, partridge, ground dove, blackbird; of insects – fireflies, crickets, moths, ants, roaches, flies, flying beetles and spiders; of 'wild' animals – rats, bats, croaking lizards, green lizards, and frogs; and of domesticated animals. Also included is the tendency to read any strange or unusual phenomena – a sudden rain, an unusually light rain or drizzle, the breaking of green branches or a wine glass without apparent cause or the fall of green leaves, thunder in dry weather, a sudden heat, and scissors, knives or pins that stick upright when they fall to the ground.

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To Our Readers

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