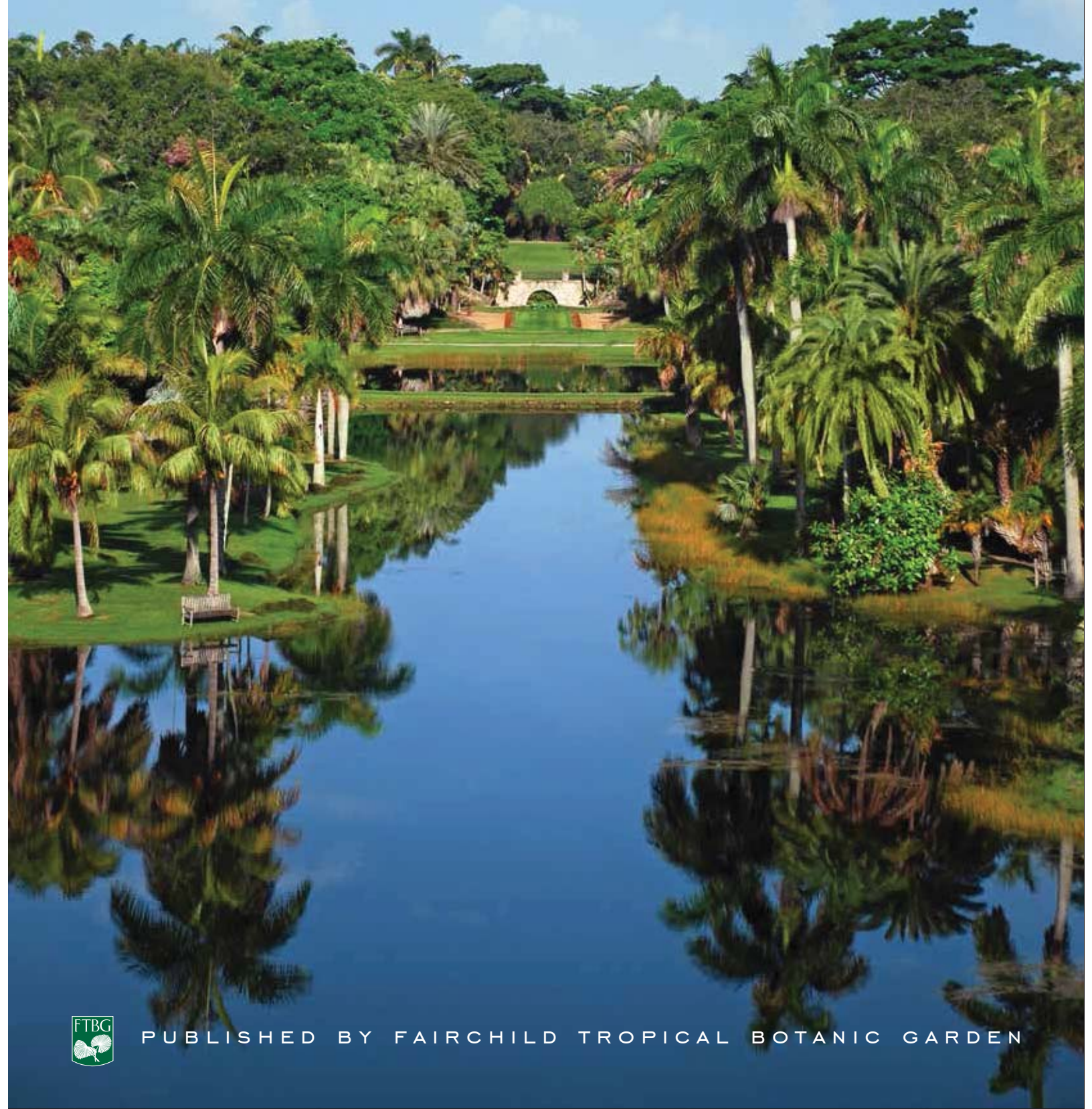
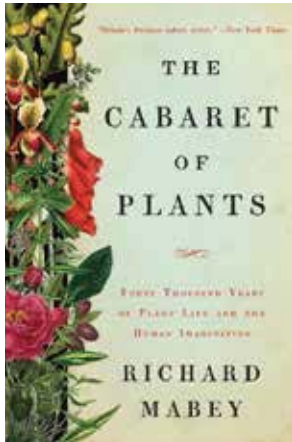


the TROPICAL GARDEN



PUBLISHED BY FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN



The Cabaret of Plants

Forty Thousand Years of Plant Life and the Human Imagination. By Richard Mabey

A collection of the common, odd, unusual and overlooked plants and their relation to—and influence on—human culture.

Reviewed by Kenneth Setzer

There are plenty of books about the outstanding characteristics of plants, and plenty on the human-plant relationships we are so often unaware of, but anything written by Richard Mabey will not fail to enthrall the reader. He should be considered a national treasure in his native England, and is held in high regard there as a premier nature and science writer.

I discovered Mabey for myself when reading his “Weeds: In Defense of Nature’s Most Unloved Plants.” Many of those plants would be more familiar to British readers, but it’s nevertheless an enriching read.

One thing I admire about “Cabaret” is that Mabey dislikes viewing plants as secondary to humans, existing purely for our benefit. It takes effort, but he encourages viewing plants as valuable in their own right, not merely as of use to human beings. “Plants as authors of their own lives,” he kindly stresses. This phenomenon is called “plant blindness,” viewing plants as no more animate than rocks. Even 35,000-year-old cave art shows a paucity of plant representation, whereas animals of the hunt are far more commonly painted, many with great realism and possible totemic value.

Mabey encourages such thinking through examples not only of the curious, beautiful and outstanding (like the *Amorphophallus*, *Amazonica* water lilies

and baobab), but also with examples of current research measuring plants’ ability to react, interact and quite possibly exist with intent.

He also takes us on personal journeys around the Britain of his youth, visiting the very limited, fragmented habitat of the true oxlip (*Primula*) species. Later, he finds examples of the species where they are not supposed to be. A relic population, this small discovery reveals what was, millennia ago, a continuous tract of woodland where now only fragments exist.

It is said there are few wild places left in the British Isles, which were deforested for wood and agriculture centuries ago, but all is not strip malls and pavement. The ancient yew of English churchyards remain wild, and present botanical mysteries: Why are so many to be found in old churchyards? Do they predate the churches, with some pre-Christian significance for which they were saved, or can they be dated to a more recent time?

A plant “cabaret” necessarily includes big trees like baobabs and sequoias, old trees like the bristlecone pine, and rare plants like Wood’s cycad. Mabey explores these old friends in new ways. At Fairchild, we are lucky enough to be able to take for granted ancient cycads and big baobabs, but certainly this is not the case for most people. Mabey clears up

much of the myth surrounding these star-attraction plants, yet only increases their wonder, while reminding us that these organisms have been evolving, mutating and cross-breeding just fine for hundreds of millions of years without human interference. (I like his appreciation of the “unpretentiousness” of a rare Wood’s cycad growing from a wood tub in Amsterdam’s Hortus Botanicus.)

Are you familiar with the story of the Vegetable Lamb of Tartary? This odd tale goes back centuries and tells of a being part plant and part animal. The vegetable lamb fruited from the plant, ate what it could reach while umbilically tethered to its mother plant and died after it could reach no more food. Fakes of this supposed plant were sold to many collectors. Mabey’s fantastic exploration traces the vegetable lamb all the way to its cottony origins.

Not bound by botany or horticulture, Mabey treads into fields as varied as history, linguistics and politics. So much more than a tale of strange plants, “Cabaret” is a culture-nature study, nature as healer proponent, and always entertains with stories of obsessive plant lovers and collectors.

Throughout the book, I kept reading and thinking, “Yes! Me too!” 