



# *the* TROPICAL GARDEN

SUMMER 2016

Summer's bounty in the tropics



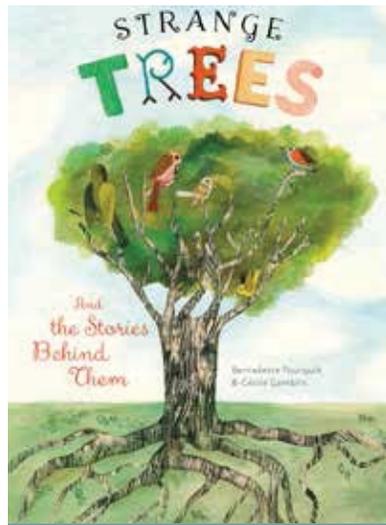
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Remember rifling through bins of books in the kids' section of the library? I sure do. I will never forget the smell of the books and the promise of discovering something new. Books make a great impression on kids and adults, and despite what you may hear, are not going away any time soon.

"Strange Trees," now there's a title I would stop at, both as a kid and now. The author presents sixteen weird trees and what's so odd about them, mixing in a little ecology, economic botany and ethnobotany in the process. It's all presented from the point of view of the tree itself, in its own voice, which I think helps instill empathy in kids towards other living things.

Consider the "Bullhorn Tree" (*Acacia cornigera*). After a little description of the tree, from the tree's point of view, we learn that its thorns are not its only defense from would-be herbivores. "Colonies of orange ants with large eyes . . . stand guard on my trunk day and night and fight off my assailants." In exchange, the bullhorn tree provides "them with a home and a cafeteria by letting them feed on my nectar!" Readers just learned about the concept of mutualism—two very different species aiding and benefitting each other.

I was pleased that so many of the trees grow at and nearby Fairchild, like the sausage tree, strangler fig and chocolate tree. One that we sadly cannot grow here is Ginkgo biloba; it's just too hot and wet. The author calls it the "forty-coin tree," because of its gorgeous golden fall foliage. I appreciate how the text sparks the imagination, particularly with the vomit-scented female tree ovules (kids love stuff like this). "I appeared 240 million years ago and am the only species of the Ginkgoaceae family that survives to this day." If that doesn't get their attention, the



## STRANGE TREES AND THE STORIES BEHIND THEM

Bernadette Pourquié  
and Cécile Gambini  
Princeton Architectural  
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By Kenneth Setzer

accompanying illustration of a dinosaur browsing a ginkgo tree with tea-drinking human observers will drive home just how ancient this tree's lineage is.

The book provides the best kind of learning—the kind that happens without the learner realizing it, the kind that gives the reader a thrill of discovering something novel. Besides, what kid wouldn't love to find out that chocolate comes from a tree, and that bubble gum also originally oozed from trees? They'll also learn about the importance of mangroves, the sheer beauty of the rainbow eucalyptus, how trees spread their seeds, and how others must store their own water.

Artist Cécile Gambini's illustrations alone make this book a worthwhile purchase. They are perfect: charming and colorful with accuracy and a little bit of mystery that keeps you looking, hoping for more to be revealed.

Another favorite is the entry on the dwarf willow. *Salix arctica* is the northernmost woody plant found, and it rarely reaches over 6 inches tall. Thanks to "Strange Trees," I know arctic hares nibble its foliage.

The book is intended for kids 6 and older, but the text is probably well beyond most 6-year-olds. But at a short page of text for each tree, you won't tax their attention span. And hey, it's good to stretch one's vocabulary and reading comprehension. And imagination. This beautiful book will do just that. 