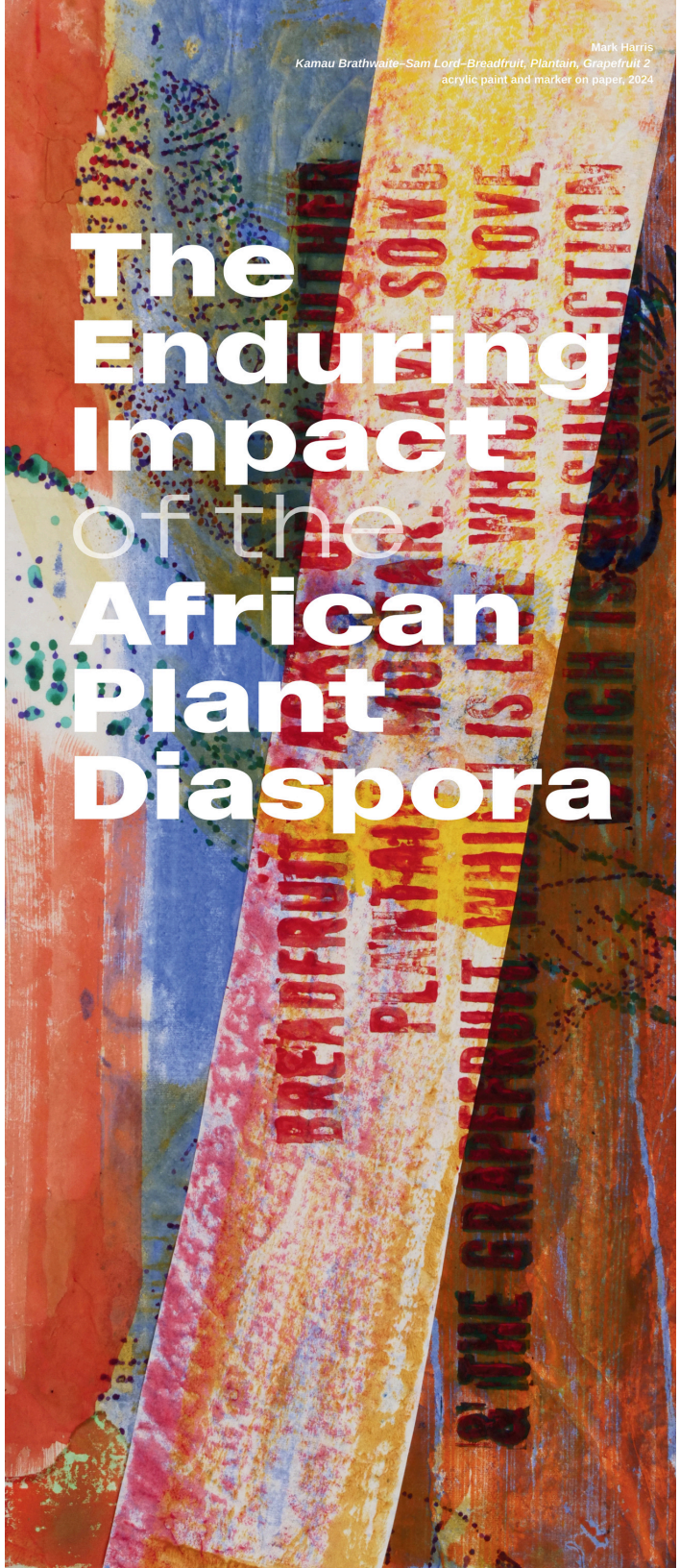



April 25-July 25, 2025


Mark Harris
African Plant Diaspora Map, 2019
Watercolor on paper

Exhibition curated by Mark Harris and Lloyd Librarians, Erin Campbell & Patrick Ford

***THE ENDURING IMPACT OF THE AFRICAN PLANT DIASPORA***

In 2023, Mark Harris worked as the Lloyd's artist-in-residence researching the African plant diaspora—the movement of food crops across the Middle Passage during the Atlantic slave trade (1525-1888) and their subsequent cultivation in the Americas. This exhibition features drawings and watercolors that result from that research and its intersection with readings of Caribbean poets Kamau Brathwaite and Olive Senior and photographs taken during Harris's recent trips to the Caribbean.

The plants featured in this exhibition fed enslaved, crew, and livestock during the long Atlantic crossings. Most produce was boarded as maritime provisions from Africa or mid-Atlantic islands like Madeira, but some plant seeds were likely concealed by captives for future use. These seeds were later cultivated in the provision gardens of the enslaved. They helped ensure nutrition and agricultural diversity to counter the dominance of plantation monocrops like sugar, coffee, cocoa, and bananas.

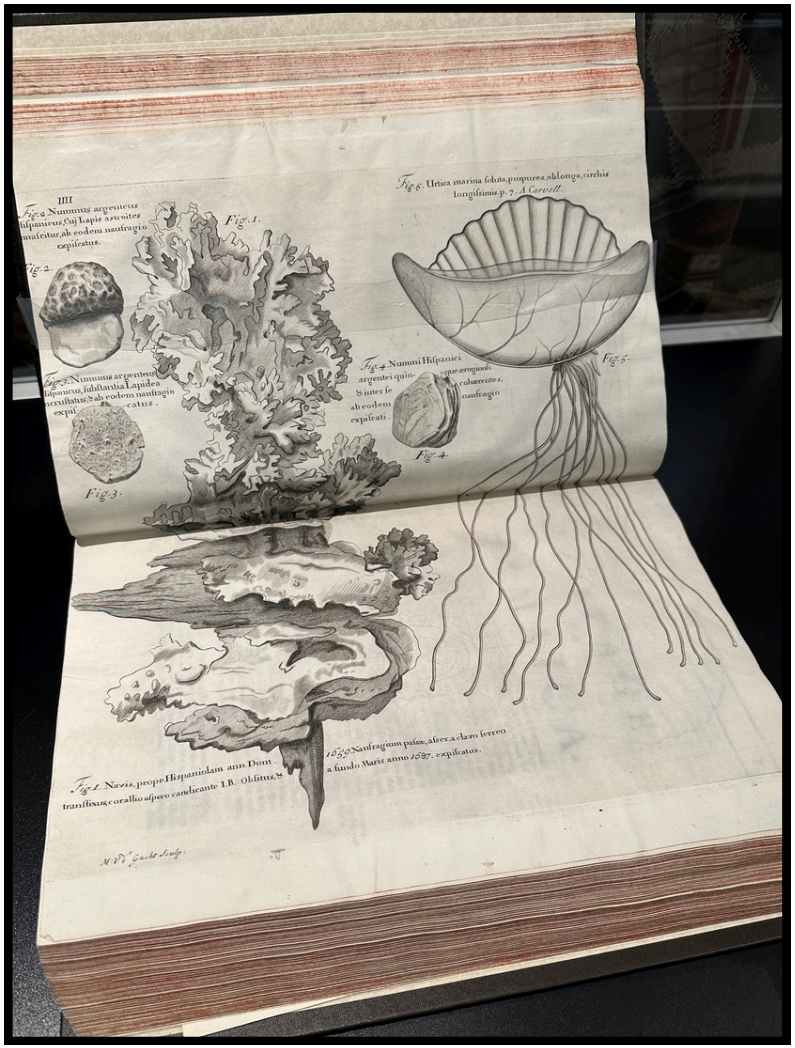
At the Lloyd, Harris engaged with some of the earliest and most celebrated colonial botanical books to better understand the economic and cultural motivations underlying 17th-century plant research in the Americas. His film Predatory Botany (on view in the gallery) methodically inspects books by Hans Sloane, Maria Sibylla Merian, Mark Catesby, and John Stedman. By highlighting illustrations while quoting passages that detail the writers' involvement with colonization and dependency on enslaved and indigenous help, the video asks how we should engage with these books today.

Harris's vibrant and eclectic work enriches and activates the Lloyd's collections by prompting conversations about the complex legacies of the African plant diaspora and colonial botany that still reverberate throughout the Americas.

Hans Sloane (1660-1753)

***A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica***

London, 1707-1725



This invaluable work of Caribbean botany, medicine, and culture is best known as Sloane's Natural History of Jamaica. Not only is it the earliest document of European medicine in the Caribbean, it expresses Sloane's openness to indigenous and African medicine and willingness to treat enslaved, indigenous, and white patients alike. He notes that free black populations in Jamaica successfully cultivated gardens of plants native to Africa in their own subsistence plots. He explains in graphic detail the brutal punishments doled out to the enslaved for disobedience. He also describes the black music of Jamaica and, with the help of a local musician, includes music and lyrics of festival songs.

A prominent physician to the British aristocracy and gentleman naturalist, Sloane's later wealth came from Caribbean slave-holding plantations owned by his wife. From an early age he was a voracious collector of books, plants, animals, and antiquities. His collection of over 71,000 items provided the foundations of the British Museum, the British Library, and the Natural History Museum, London.

This image depicts coral-encrusted doubloons (Spanish gold coins), a ship's spar, and a Portuguese man o' war, a venomous sea creature. The Latin captions tell us that the coins have been recovered from a Spanish shipwreck in 1687. In placing the man o' war next to the salvaged goods, Sloane extends a clever pun, as man o' war is also a term for heavily armed warships. Though not present at its recovery, Sloane came to possess some of the shipwreck's contents. Scholars have determined that specialist enslaved divers were used to recover treasure and were likely paid for their work.

Freiherr von Nikolaus Joseph Jacquin (1727-1817)

## *Icones selectarum stirpium Americanarum*

Vienna, 1797

Jacquin's work is a systematic catalogue of the flora, fauna, and minerals of the Caribbean made under the patronage of Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria. It contains the first recorded Linnaean nomenclature of many plants, some of which were transferred to the Americas through the African diaspora. His name for the oil palm, Elaeis guineensis, is still used today. Carl Linnaeus was so impressed with the work that he began what became a lifelong correspondence with Jacquin. His work also directly inspired Alexander von Humboldt's exploration of the Americas.

Jacquin spent four years exploring the Caribbean and made hundreds of drawings and watercolors of the species he collected. The frontispiece displayed here features an indigenous man and woman holding a map of the Caribbean, surrounded by native flora and seashells, with a bird in flight overhead. The title ribbon above the map reads Selectarum stirpium americanarum icones, or "Selected icons of the Americas."

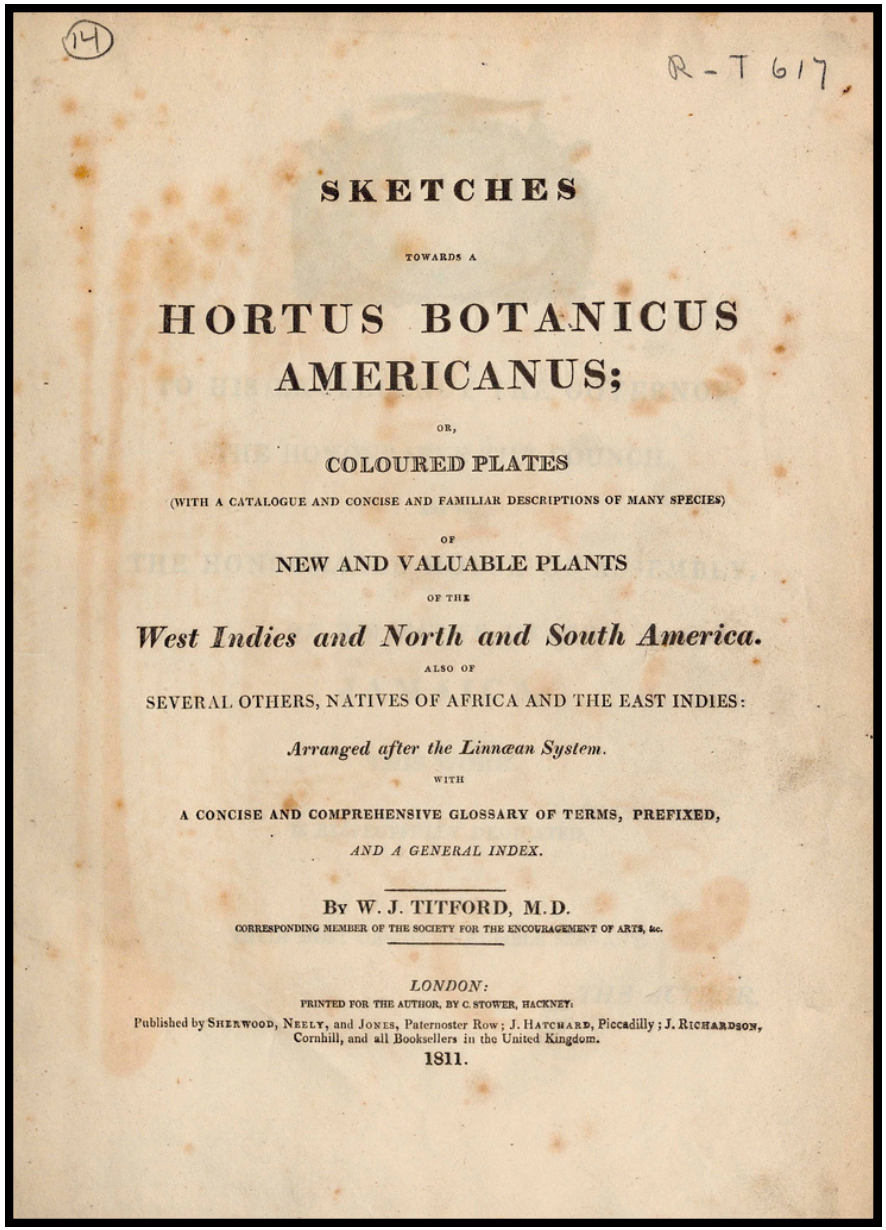
W.J. Titford (1784-c. 1823)

## *Sketches towards a Hortus Botanicus Americanus*

London, 1811


Born in Jamaica and educated in England and the US, Titford began drawing Caribbean trees and flowers due the scarcity of books on the topic. Though not known to have had artistic training, Titford's drawings have an unsophisticated but charming exuberance. The frontispiece displayed here depicts a bountiful cornucopia of tropical fruits, including breadfruit, pineapple, soursop, jack fruit, banana, and tamarind.

Throughout the book, Titford credits black and indigenous medicinal knowledge. He draws attention to the "humble shrubs and lowly herbs" the "wonderous medical values of which are known only to the natives, by experience and observation." He also tells a story of collecting plants to draw and being assisted by a famous "negro doctress…whose knowledge, in the opinion of the negroes, was far superior to that of physicians."




SKETCHES

TOWARDS A

HORTUS BOTANICUS AMERICANUS;

OR,

COLOURED PLATES

(WITH A CATALOGUE AND CONCISE AND FAMILIAR DESCRIPTIONS OF MANY SPECIES)

OF

NEW AND VALUABLE PLANTS

OF THE

*West Indies and North and South America.*

ALSO OF

SEVERAL OTHERS, NATIVES OF AFRICA AND THE EAST INDIES:

*Arranged after the Linnæan System.*

WITH

A CONCISE AND COMPREHENSIVE GLOSSARY OF TERMS, PREFIXED,

*AND A GENERAL INDEX.*

By W. J. TITFORD, M.D.

CORRESPONDING MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF ARTS, &c.

*LONDON:*

PRINTED FOR THE AUTHOR, BY C. STOWER, HACKNEY:

Published by SHERWOOD, NEELY, and JONES, Paternoster Row; J. HATCHARD, Piccadilly; J. RICHARDSON, Cornhill, and all Booksellers in the United Kingdom.

1811.

**Ther Lloyd Library has digitized this book.**

Mark Catesby (1683-1749)

## *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*

London, 1731-1743


It is essential to understand Catesby's monumental and beloved work in the context of both environmental calamity and colonial slavery. In the 1720s, the cultivation of rice by slave labor in the Carolinas led to large-scale deforestation, increased pest populations, and diseases like malaria and yellow fever. By annually shipping 20 engravings depicting the region's flora and fauna, Catesby provided up-to-date information to temper his patrons' concerns that these issues would impede profits and scientific advancement.

Catesby frequently acknowledges the knowledge and contributions of both indigenous and enslaved people in his work, particularly in areas like agriculture and plant identification. However, as scholar Christopher P. Iannini has noted, through the efforts of Catesby and Hans Sloane, "natural history emerged as a crucial medium for assessing the moral significance of colonial slavery as a new and seemingly necessary dimension of modern social and economic life."

Maria Sybilla Merian (1647-1717)

***Over de voortteeling en wonderbaerlyke veranderingen der Surinaamsche insecten***

Amsterdam, 1730

Amsterdam-based German naturalist and illustrator Merian traveled to the Dutch colony of Suriname with her daughter Dorothea in 1699. For two years they recorded the life cycles of insects and plants. The resulting book is, according to conchologist S. Peter Dance, “easily the most magnificent work on insects produced.” First published in 1705, this expanded second edition added 12 plates after Merian's elder daughter Johanna. In it, Merian acknowledges the enslaved Africans and Indigenous people who collected specimens, carried equipment, and shared knowledge about their lands. (Note the working figures in the distance at the middle-left of the page.)

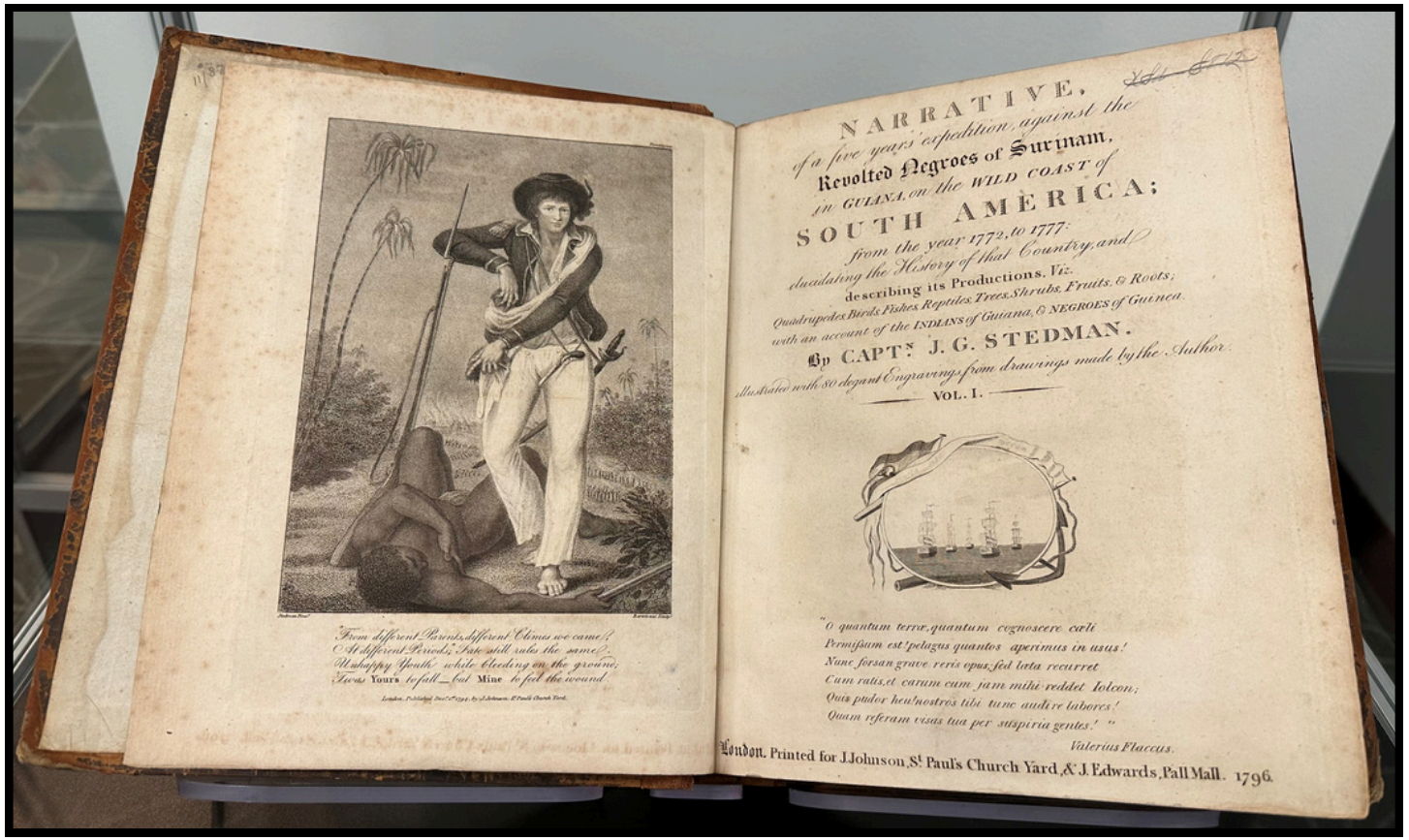
In the text accompanying the peacock flower, plate 34, Merian shares what has been interpreted as a veiled antislavery comment: “The Indians, who are not treated well by their Dutch masters, use these seeds to abort their children, so that their children will not become slaves like they are. The black slaves from Guinea and Angola have demanded to be well treated, threatening to refuse to have children. They told me this themselves.”

**The Lloyd Library has digitized this book.**

John Gabriel Stedman (1744-1797)

***A Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the Wild Coast of South America, from the Year 1772 to 1777***

London, 1796




The Scottish-Dutch mercenary Stedman wrote his Narrative while a soldier in a Dutch regiment assisting colonial troops suppressing Maroon uprisings in Suriname. Though pro-slavery, Stedman decries its barbarity, objects to overly harsh punishments of enslaved people, and often identifies with the punished. Stedman is responsible for the initial drawings in the book, but the engravings were done by others, including sixteen by William Blake, with whom Stedman became friends.

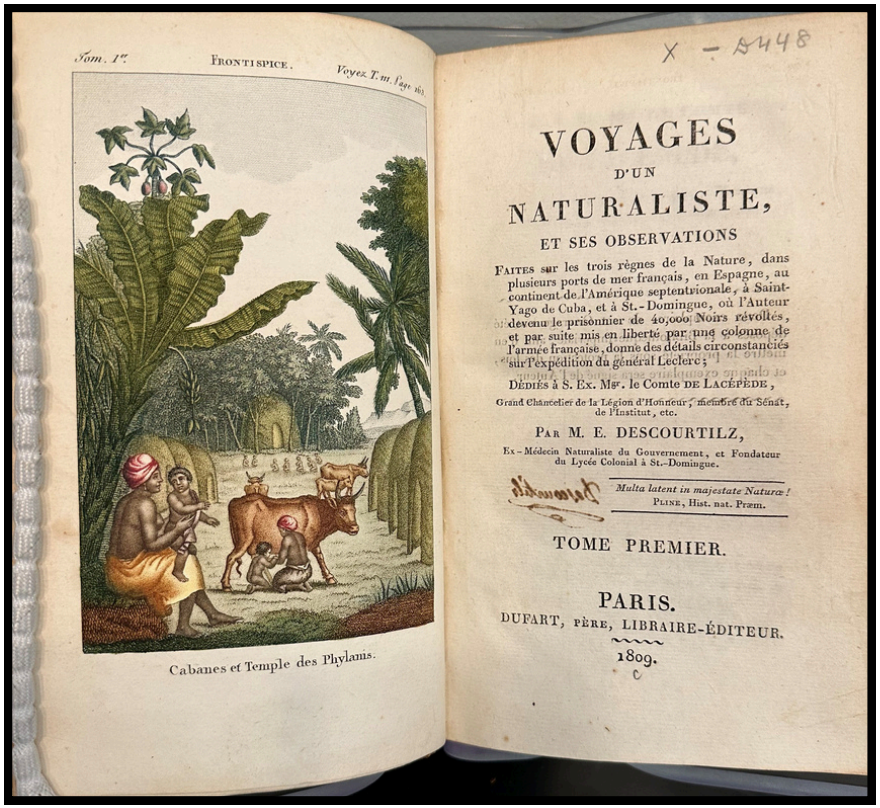
A major success, the book was translated into six languages and published in over twenty-five editions. Its publisher, Joseph Johnson, was a radical figure who was later imprisoned for distributing works that supported the oppressed. Stedman's graphic insights into the realities of the slave trade led to his book being embraced by the abolitionist cause. The frontispiece displayed here shows a self-portrait of Stedman standing over a Maroon warrior killed in battle after the capture of a village in Suriname.

**The Lloyd Library has digitized this book.**

M.E. Descourtilz (1775-1835)

***Voyages d'un naturalist***

Paris, 1809





In this breathless narrative, French physician, botanist, and historian Descourtilz recounts his time in Saint-Domingue, where he witnessed the Haitian Revolution. He was constantly escaping mortal danger despite having a passport from Haitian general Toussaint Louverture and serving as a physician to Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the future first Haitian Emperor. Although he collected specimens, made sketches, and documented language and music, most of it was lost during the war. His first-person account of the Revolution, however, remains a critical, if controversial document.

This is a three volume set the images are the respective frontispieces for eack volume.

Carmel Buckley and Mark Harris

***Colonial Stockbook*, 1998**

Stamp album with original colonial West Indian stamps, modified reproductions, CD player, speaker, CD


The book juxtaposes contradictory representations of working conditions in Trinidad in the early 20th century. 1930s Trinidadian calypsos about protests and strikes can be heard alongside stamps designed by Crown publishers in the United Kingdom. The stamp images depict contented scenes of labor that propagandize colonial rule as focused on the welfare and prosperity of its subjects. On the left-hand side, remade stamps remove the monarch's portrait, leaving just the worker and landscape.

M.E. Descourtilz (1775-1835)

***Flore pittoresque et médicale des Antilles***

Paris, 1827-1833


# Ackee

***The Botanical Cabinet***

London, 1828

**Ackee Blighia sapida a.k.a. ankye, akye, guinep**

Native to Ghana, ackee is a tropical fruit from a tree widely cultivated and naturalized in the tropics, particularly in Jamaica where it's the national fruit. It came to the Americas in the 1700s, likely on slave ships. The fruit's edible fleshy seed covering, which has a mild, nutty flavor, is packed with fiber, protein, and vitamin C. It is the main ingredient of Jamaica's national dish, ackee and saltfish. The world's fastest man, Usain Bolt, is known to eat the dish for breakfast.

Ackee and saltfish was a cheap and nutritious meal for enslaved people on Jamaica's hot and humid sugar plantations. Ackee remains a common folk medicine used to treat inflammation, colds, and even malaria, though there is no sufficient clinical evidence of its efficacy. It is linked to Vodou practices in West Africa and Haiti, being used in spells to bring good fortune. The US has banned fresh ackee imports due to potentially high levels of the toxin hypoglycin A in unripe fruit.

# Black-eyed pea

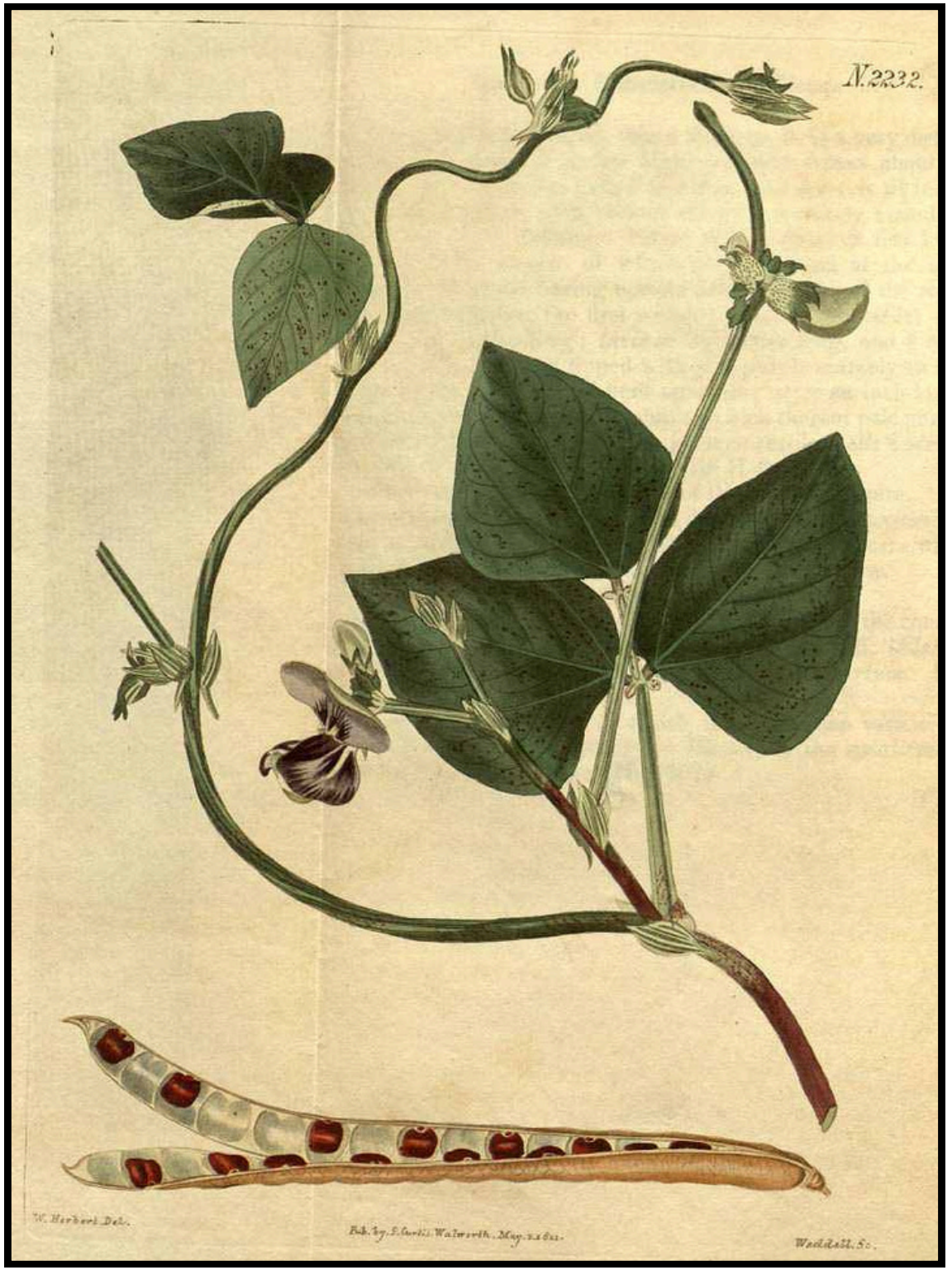
**Black-eyed pea Vigna unguiculata a.k.a cowpeas, field peas, southern peas**

The black-eyed pea originated in West Africa and is now cultivated throughout the world. Extremely tolerant to drought, it must be sown while the soil is warm. Along with melegueta pepper, it is one of the staples to the African diet purchased in African ports as sustenance for captives on the Middle Passage.

Several contemporaneous resources throughout the Americas documented foods favored by enslaved people that were grown in their own subsistence gardens, including black-eyed peas, okra, millet, yams, and African rice. Scholar Judith Carney has noted that, “African food staples infiltrated the cuisine of slaveholders through the dishes their female cooks prepared for them.”

***Curtis’s Botanical Magazine***

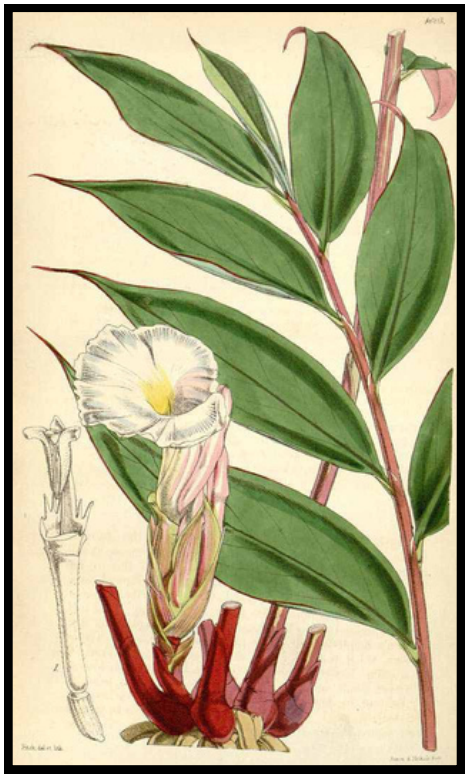
London, 1821



# Melegueta pepper

**Melegueta pepper Afromomum melegueta a.k.a. grains of paradise, Guinea grains, Guinea pepper**

***Curtis's Botanical Magazine***
London, 1815



Melegueta pepper is native to Africa's Pepper Coast, a swampy area of coastal West Africa between Cape Mesurado and Cape Palmas in Liberia. The purple flowers of this herbaceous perennial develop into pods that contain small, reddish-brown seeds. A member of the ginger family, melegueta pepper seeds impart a citrusy, black-pepper flavor much like cardamom, to which it is closely related.

Along with black-eyed pea, melegueta pepper was one of the staples of the African diet that was purchased at African ports as sustenance for captives on the Middle Passage. It remains a staple spice in Caribbean cuisine, used as a distinguished but milder alternative to black pepper. It has played a vital role in the traditional medicine of West Africa, some of which has transferred to the Americas through the African diaspora. Clinical research suggests its efficacy as an antioxidant and anti-inflammatory.

In the Caribbean and Latin America, it is used in various Vodou religious rites to attract good luck, influence relationships, and ward off evil. It is widely used among Protestant Christian practitioners of African American hoodoo, where seeds are held in the mouth or chewed to prove sincerity.

Harry Johnston (1858-1927)
***Liberia***
London, 1906

The West African nation of Liberia was founded by free people of color from the United States. Over 18,000 freed and free-born African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans relocated there between 1822 and 1861. Johnston wrote this immense two-volume book on the country only 59 years after it had declared independence from the US in 1847.

Johnston was a colonial administrator, botanist, artist, and linguist who published over 40 books on Africa. In its preface he offers the books as a "paltry atonement for the wrong-doing of the slave trade." Though he distances himself from slavery's evils, he was a primary architect of the British colonization of Africa and was knighted for consolidating more than 200,000 square miles of its lands—more than twice the area of the United Kingdom.

Johnston discusses Liberia's slave trade as well as its botanical and zoological economy, and himself provides extensive color, black-and-white, and photographic illustrations for the book. In the image on the left, Johnston interprets the powerful and distinctive melegueta pepper with dramatic baroque lighting and rich, saturated colors.

# Tamarind

**Tamarind Tamarindus indica a.k.a. tambrin, tamón**

Indigenous to tropical Africa, tamarind is cultivated in tropical and subtropical zones around the world for food, traditional medicine, oil, and wood. Its high resistance to wind and salt make it ideal for coastal climates. High in antioxidants and vitamin C, it has a long history of use as traditional medicine in Africa and African diaspora communities. Its pulp is used to treat constipation, and its leaves and bark are used to dress wounds. Clinical studies have suggested its efficacy in treating diabetes and cholesterol.


Elizabeth Blackwell

***Herbarium Blackwellianum***

Nuremburg, 1750-1773

The Lloyd Library has digitized this book.

Its fruit has a juicy, acidic pulp that is brown when mature and has a sweet- sour flavor, like citrus with a hint of molasses. Tamarind's flavor makes it versatile for both sweet and savory dishes and is used in sauces, desserts, and drinks. Tambran is a tamarind-based sauce common in Trinidad, Tobago, and Jamaica. Agua de tamarindo is a popular drink in Puerto Rico, and tamarind-based candies are enjoyed by diaspora communities throughout the Americas.

Both illustrations featured here are from books of medicinal plants used as resources for doctors and pharmacists.


M.E. Descourtilz (1775-1835)

***Flore pittoresque et médicale des Antilles***

Paris, 1827-1833

# Amaranth

**Amaranth Amaranthus tricolor a.k.a. edible amaranth, bhaji, callaloo, African spinach**

While various species of amaranth are native to both Africa and the New World, Amaranthus tricolor was likely transferred through the slave trade. Instantly recognizable for its distinctive yellow, red, and green foliage and small, spiky pink flowers, it is now the most common species in the Americas. In Africa and diaspora communities in the West, it is primarily used as a leafy green vegetable.

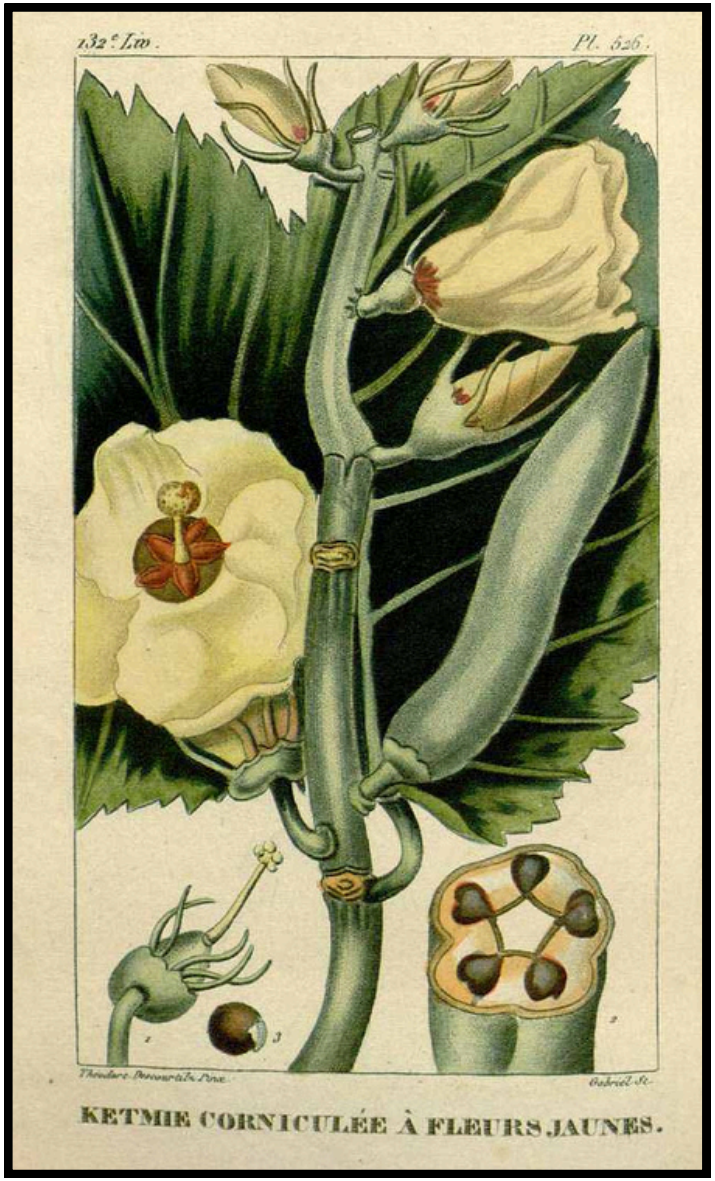
Amaranth is commonly known in the Caribbean as callaloo, which is also the name of a popular side dish made with amaranth greens, onions, garlic, scotch bonnet, and thyme. It is also used in pepper pot soup, which originated in West Africa but became one of the first American street foods, sold in early-nineteenth-century Philadelphia by African American women. African diaspora communities in the Americas have retained its uses as West African folk medicine to treat diarrhea, ulcers, and regulate menstrual bleeding. Various species of amaranth are used in rituals of Winti, a syncretic African religion in Suriname.


Elizabeth Blackwell

***Herbarium Blackwellianum***

Nuremburg, 1750-1773

# Okra




M.E. Descourtilz (1775-1835)

***Flore pittoresque et médicale des Antilles***

Paris, 1827-1833

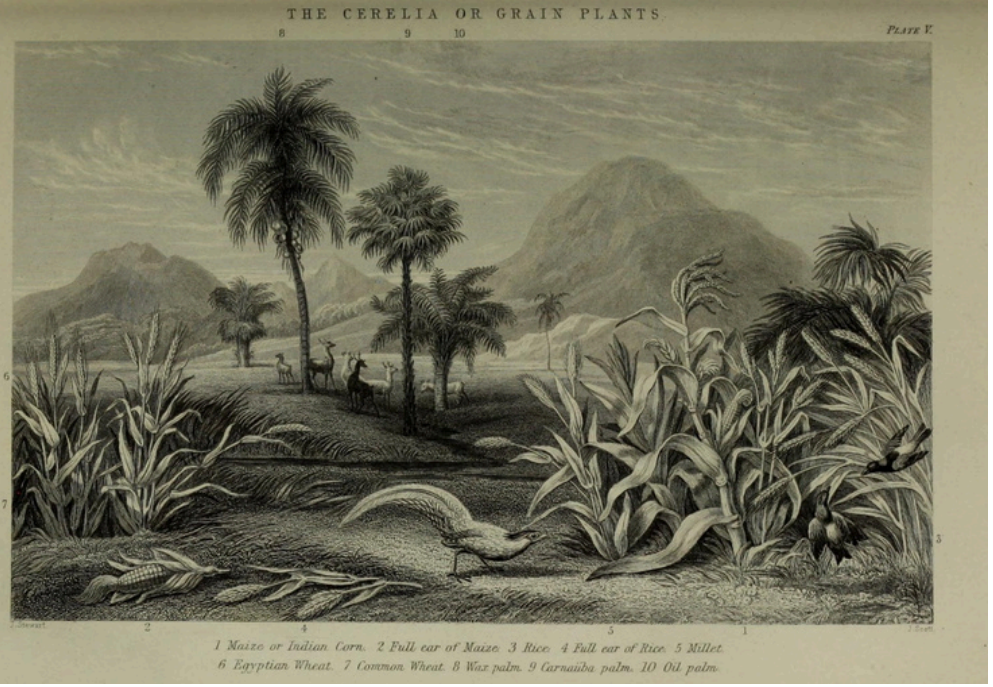
**Okra Abelmoschus esculentus a.k.a. lady's fingers, quimbombó, calalou, gumbo**

Native to East Africa, okra is a flowering plant from the mallow family, which includes cotton, cocoa, and hibiscus. It is naturally a perennial though often cultivated as an annual in temperate climates, growing to about two meters tall. Among the most heat- and drought-tolerant vegetable species, it is a popular food in tropical regions worldwide. Rich in magnesium and vitamins A, C, and K, it improves digestive health and promotes a healthy gut biome.

Okra is a staple of African diaspora communities throughout the Americas, from Brazil to the Carolinas. It is perhaps best known in the US as the primary ingredient in gumbo, a strongly flavored stew native to Africa that is the official state food of Louisiana. The word gumbo comes from the Bantu term ki ngombo, meaning okra.

Okra is among several plants transferred from Africa during the slave trade that reached the Americas essentially unnoticed—they were often not included on ships' logs and may have been brought aboard ships by captive Africans. Other ostensibly smuggled plants include ackee, black-eyed peas, tamarind, and watermelon.

# Oil Palm




William Rhind (1833-1867)

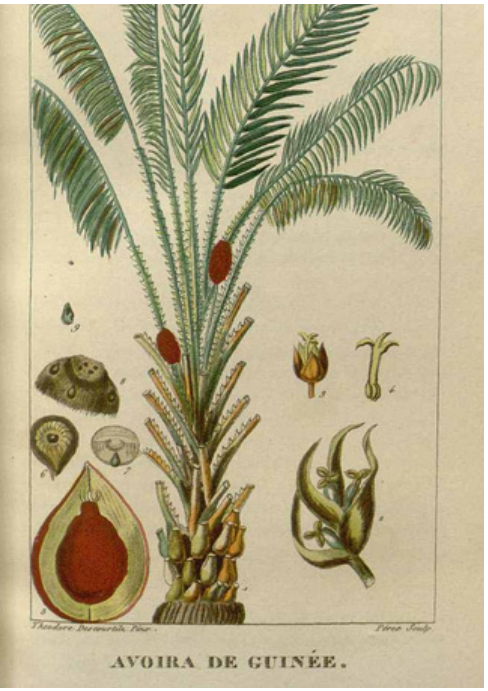
***A History of the Vegetable Kingdom***

London, 1855

**Oil palm Elaeis guineensis a.k.a. African oil palm, macaw fat**

Native to the West African savanna but naturalized in the Caribbean, oil palm is the principal source of palm oil, which is used in cooking, soaps, and biofuel. The southern coast of Nigeria was once called the Palm Oil Coast by the first Europeans who arrived there. Though it is produced in vast industrial plantations in the Americas, the oil palm is still cultivated by small farmers. The sap from oil palm is used to create palm wine. Oil palm purchased from coastal West Africa was among the African staples used by captives in the Middle Passage. Its use in treating skin infections in traditional African medicine transferred to the Americas.

The production of oil palm has been documented as a cause of permanent damage to the environment, leading to deforestation, the dispossession of indigenous communities, and greenhouse gas emissions. Its use as biofuel has increased demand in recent years, though the environmental impact of its cultivation has cooled production by developed nations.




M.E. Descourtilz (1775-1835)

***Flore pittoresque et médicale des Antilles***

Paris, 1827-1833

***L'Illustration horticole***

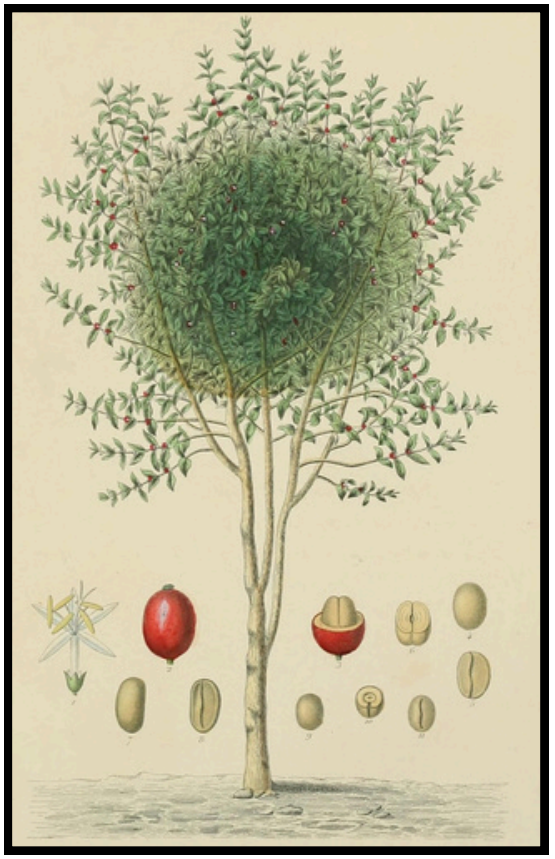
Ghent, 1866


# Coffee

Friedrich Gottlob Hayne
(1763-1832)

***Getreue Darstellung und Beschreibung der in der Arzneykunde gebräuchlichen Gewächse***

Berlin, 1805-1856



Aristide Dupuis (1823-1883)

***Le Régne végetal***

Paris, 1870

**Coffee Coffea arabica, a.k.a. Arabian coffee, Ethiopian coffee, coffee tree**

Native to Ethiopia, Coffea arabica is believed to be the first species of coffee cultivated. It remains the dominant cultivar, accounting for 60% of global production. Wild plants grow up to 12 meters tall, with glossy dark green leaves, white clustered flowers, and “cherry” typically containing two coffee beans. It is naturalized in tropical regions around the world, including the Caribbean and Latin American. Beyond its wide use as a stimulant, coffee was used in African folk medicine to treat headaches and asthma. Coffee is the key ingredient in various hot and cold beverages in the Americas, such as cafecito, café con leche, and Caribbean coffee, which is mixed with rum. Coffee brewed with Coffea arabica is known for its nutty, fruity, and floral notes.

Scholars remain divided about how coffee was first introduced to the Americas, whether it was brought by enslaved Africans or enterprising Europeans. Regardless, as European demand for coffee grew in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, colonizers established plantations in the Caribbean and other regions, using enslaved Africans as labor for coffee cultivation.

Though many plants featured in this exhibit were expressly grown by the enslaved for their own consumption, the staple crops of the Caribbean plant economy—sugar, coffee, cocoa, tobacco, and bananas—were grown by enslaved people for plantation owners to sell. Coffee was introduced to Jamaica by Governor Sir Nicholas Lawes in 1718. The mountainous regions of Jamaica and Haiti offer ideal growing conditions, and coffee remains a significant part of the Caribbean economy.

# Banana/Plantain

François Pierre Chaumeton (1775-1819)

***Flore médicale***

Paris, 1842-1845

**Banana/Plantain Musa x paradisiaca a.k.a. plátanos, green bananas, Caribbean figs**

Most bananas and plantains are cultivars of the hybrid species Musa x paradisiaca. Native to Southeast Asia, they came to Africa as early as 5,000 years ago. Before the slave trade, they were introduced to the Americas through global trade precipitated by Columbus's exploration. Slave traders brought them to the Caribbean on slave ships, which led to the establishment of plantations there and in Latin America.

As a critical source of sustenance and nutrition, bananas and plantains exemplified African heritage and home to enslaved Africans, particularly in the Caribbean and Central America. Plantain leaves have long been used as thatch, floor litter for stables, and for dressing wounds. Paper pulp and cloth can be made from plantain fiber.

Though closely related, bananas and plantains have key differences in size, texture, and flavor. Bananas are smaller and sweeter; plantains are larger, starchier, and less sweet. Bananas are eaten both raw and cooked in recipes such as banana chips, fritters, and preserves. Banana pudding is particularly popular with diaspora communities in the southern US. Plantains are often used in savory dishes, prepared simply as tostones (fried chips) or maduros (fried ripe), or in dishes like mofongo (mashed with pork) or fufu (boiled and beaten with meat or fish).

Bananas and plantains hold significant importance in African diaspora communities, including Jamaica, where they symbolize resilience and prosperity. Following their country's official end of slavery in 1838, newly emancipated Jamaicans spearheaded the growth of the banana trade, which reduced reliance on sugar plantations. By the 1900s, they experienced an explosive expansion of banana plantations, driven by exports to North America and Europe. "Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)," is a song of resistance and social commentary set in Jamaica's colonial banana trade.


Jane Wallace Penfold (1820-1884)

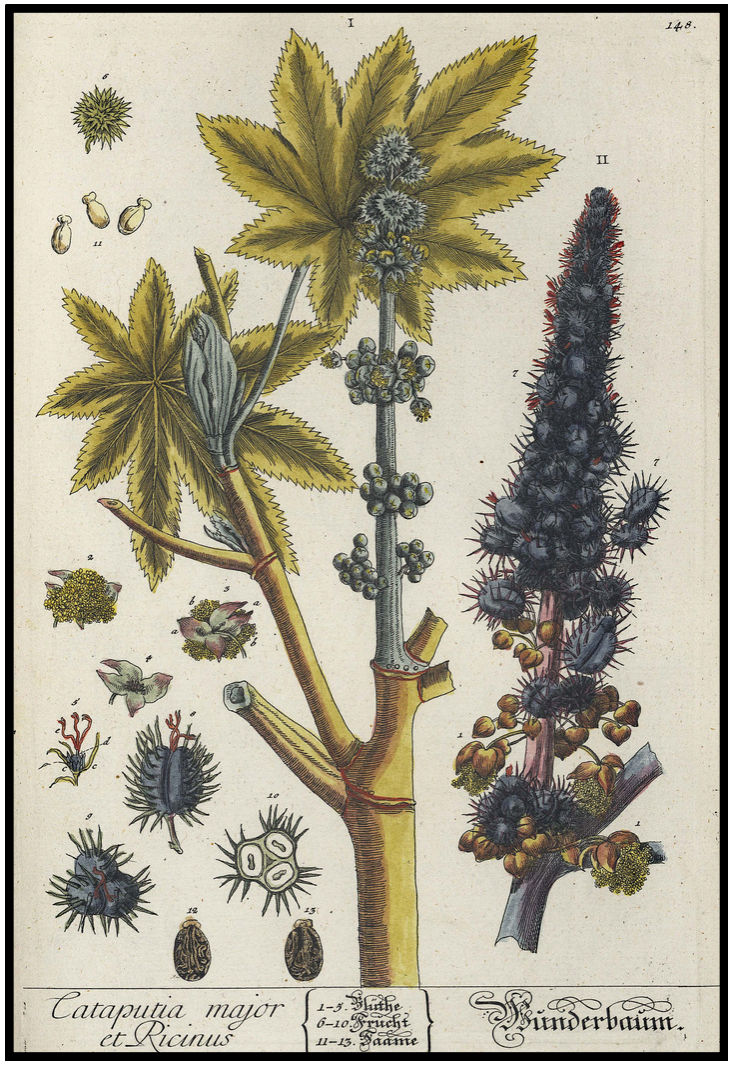
***Madeira Flowers, Fruits, and Ferns***

London, 1845

Gottlieb Tobias Wilhelm (1758-1811)

***Unterhaltungen aus der Naturgeschite***

Augsburg, 1810-1812




# Castor Bean

**Castor Bean Ricinus communis a.k.a. cawapat, higuera, higuereta, maskèti**

The castor bean's central role in the transatlantic slave trade cannot be overstated. As Judith Carney notes, "slave merchants on both sides of the Atlantic learned to appreciate [its] medicinal properties…as a remedy for many afflictions suffered by captives," including constipation, skin ailments, and head lice. It was also important to the enslaved themselves. Native to sub-Saharan Africa, castor bean was long known to treat those afflictions as well as venereal disease, joint pain, and eye infections. It is among the plants depicted in the gardens of enslaved people in Brazil in nineteenth-century drawings.

It was a source of lamp oil when candles were the only other source of illumination. It is still planted today for this purpose by Maroon communities of remote Brazil. To Carney, the castor bean exemplifies the agency of enslaved populations whose "familiar foods and medicines that accompanied them across the Middle Passage could now forestall hunger and treat ailments."


Friedrich Gottlob Hayne (1763-1832)

***Getreue Darstellung und Beschreibung der in der Arzneykunde gebräuchlichen Gewächse***

Berlin, 1805-1856

Castor bean is extremely allergenic and a strong trigger for asthma. It is also the source of ricin, a highly potent toxin that has been called the world's most poisonous common plant. Commercial castor oil, however, is not toxic to humans in normal doses.

Castor bean's distinctive appearance, with large glossy leaves and ominously spiky fruit, both of which change from green to purple, has long attracted the attention of writers and artists, including Elizabeth Blackwell, one of the greatest botanical illustrators of the eighteenth century, whose works are shown here.

Elizabeth Blackwell

***Herbarium Blackwellianum***

Nuremburg, 1750-1773

**The Lloyd Library has digitized this book.**

# Kola Nut


***Curtis's Botanical Magazine***

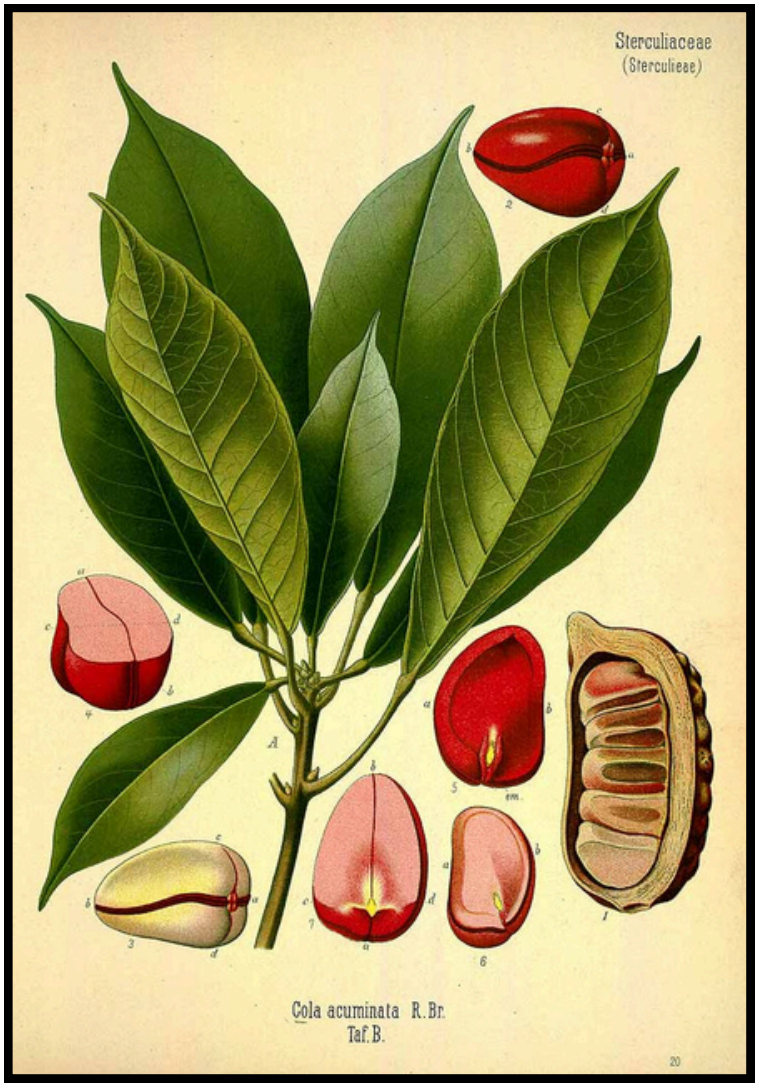
London, 1821

**Kola nut Cola acuminata a.k.a. bissy, bizzy, obi**

Native to the tropical rainforests of Africa, kola nuts come from evergreen trees that can grow more than twenty meters tall. They can also withstand dry climates on sites with high groundwater level, common in the Caribbean. With a bittersweet flavor and high caffeine content, they are used as a home remedy to provide energy and suppress appetite.

Inspired by African practice, kola nuts were used to improve the quality of drinking water on slave ships sailing from Africa to the Americas. Bissy tea, made from the nut, remains a common drink in the Caribbean, particularly in Jamaica. Kola nut extract was originally used in Coca-Cola, the world's most popular soft drink, but as of 2016 the formula no longer contained it.

In Caribbean communities with strong roots in West Africa, kola nuts are used ceremonially as a symbol of respect, goodwill, protection against witchcraft, and hospitality, particularly when welcoming visitors or during ceremonial events like weddings.




Hermann Köhler (1834-1879)

***Köhler's Medizinal-Pflanzen***

Gera (Germany), 1883-1914

# *Predatory Botany*

As they turned the pages of these books, few readers of the time would have chosen otherwise than to overlook the cruelties underlying the production of every botanical image. As Theodor Adorno wrote in Aesthetic Theory about Nazi art, “The more torture went on in the basement, the more insistently they made sure that the roof rested on columns.”

We can think of the diverging material experiences felt by colonizers and enslaved in degrees of hunger and pain. According to Hans Sloane’s medical accounts, susceptibility to disease was exacerbated for plantation owners by excessive eating and drinking, and for the enslaved by poor nutrition and overwork.
Fictional narratives like Toni Morrison’s Beloved or Octavia Butler’s Kindred may be the most effective at conveying a material immediacy to slavery. Yet, besides their contents, the material properties of the books we’re looking at here also offer an understanding of how they come out of the repressive conditions of the plantation. For plantation regimes the experiences of noise and silence were also functions of privilege and repression. As an acoustic event, the sound of book pages turning would have signaled an insurmountable barrier between the literate plantation class and the enslaved worker who was invariably subject to punishment if caught learning to read.

Although few finished volumes, after being printed in Europe, would have made their way back to subscribers in the colonies, their status as luxury commodities only amplified the inequalities that books helped to enforce under slavery. Because of the quality and size of their paper, binding, age, and amount of ink in the illustrations, the sound signatures are different for each of them.
The books’ sonorities that conferred status as a soundtrack to colonial education and wealth still signal the sonic and botanical color lines that separated Black from white.
Here then, repeatedly, is the sound of the pages turning.

Mark Harris