

## Haddam Garden Club

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Garden Blog Article

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### Among the Monkeys

For a gardener, travel is an opportunity to see new plants, different styles of garden design, and unfamiliar, possibly innovative approaches to the challenges all gardeners face. During this winter's persistent deep freeze, I spent a week in the warm sunshine of Costa Rica. A midwinter getaway is an indulgence with much to recommend it, although scheduling your departure for the day your airport of choice is hit with the worst snowstorm in the last decade can somewhat blight the experience.

The first feature you notice in a tropical landscape is its intense greenness. The second is that everything is BIG! Gunnera, a member of the rhubarb family, is nicknamed 'dinosaur food' or 'poor man's umbrella,' which should give you a pretty accurate idea of its size. Banana leaves stretch taller than people. Ficus (fig), a finicky house plant for us, grows wild as a forest giant hundreds of feet tall, with buttress roots like low walls extending in every direction. The Australian tree fern, unfortunately invasive, easily reaches 15 feet and can be twice that. Elephant ears and colorful crotons, expensive hothouse specimens for us, are common roadside vegetation.

And the misery inflicted by our native poison ivy pales in comparison to the dangers of some Central American species. Both mangoes and cashews contain urushiol, the same oil that causes the poison ivy itch; cashews, in particular, require careful processing to remove it, and are never sold in the shell. Bullhorn acacia isn't a problem in itself, but it houses aggressive stinging 'bullet ants,' so named for the sensation of their bites. They will actually jump out and sting anyone perceived as a threat to their nests. But, while any of these trees can spoil your tropical vacation, none is as lethal as the manchineel (hippomane mancinella), which has the dubious honor of being the world's most dangerous tree. This 'tree of death' is handsome, with widespread branches, shiny magnolia-like leaves, and fruit that resembles a small green apple. But don't touch it. Don't eat the fruit. Don't even take shelter under it when it's raining, because the toxins washed down with the rain can blister your skin and leave you blind. It's quite jarring to visit the beach on a hot day, thinking you'll lay your blanket in the shade, only to see skull-and-cross-bone warning signs on every tree trunk.

As a nation, Costa Rica has staked its future, and its economy, on ecotourism. A local slogan reads "still more monkeys than people." Recognizing that its capuchin, howler, and critically endangered titi monkeys, together with the biodiversity they depend upon, are an essential component of prosperity, the people have created an unusual

alliance between conservationists and business leaders. 98% of the nation's energy comes from renewable sources: water (they have magnificent waterfalls!), wind, and geothermal energy, this last derived from six active volcanoes along the Pacific 'Ring of Fire.' Former banana plantations are being painstakingly replanted with native species. Guards will go through your backpack to prevent you from bringing food, disposable water bottles, or even chewing gum into the country's 32 national parks, 51 wildlife refuges, 13 forest reserves, and 8 biological reserves.

It's not a perfect conservationist heaven. The tourism on which the country depends brings all its usual problems of water usage, waste disposal, and traffic. We didn't see extensive lawns anywhere, but we did see too much monoculture, in the form of miles of palm oil plantations. Palm oil fruit can weigh up to 200 pounds apiece. They are harvested by workers wielding long poles from the ground, and while most can dodge the obvious danger of getting hit on the head, it's much harder to avoid the thorny leaves, with toxins capable of causing serious bone infections, to the point of amputation, or the bite of the fer-de-lance, a small but lethally venomous pit viper hiding in the brush at the base of the trees. With prompt antivenom treatment, it won't kill you. Probably. Most Costa Ricans shun this difficult and dangerous job, so neighboring Nicaragua supplies much of the work force.

Despite its flaws, Costa Rica still has an enviable economy compared with its neighbors, even though they all share a similar climate, cloud-forested mountains, dramatic volcanoes, and inviting beaches. The decision to treat the natural world as an asset to be leveraged, rather than as an obstacle to development, has proven to be a winning strategy. One wonders if a small town, blessed with thousands of acres of state forest, fifty miles of hiking trails, and a magical cove giving access to a scenic river, could take a lesson from this example.