



My search for the
world's most dangerous tree

Description

Finding the Manchineel tree in the Turks & Caicos Islands

By **Michael Walsh**

Of all the trees we could've hit, we had to get one that hits back.

J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

Many of you are well aware of my fascination with trees. It all started, many years ago, as a research assistant with the Canadian Forest Service investigating diseases specific to white pines.

Since then, I have noticed many people pay as much attention to trees as they do with people on a bus! Hopefully, these short articles will provide an insight into the many species of trees that grace our collective environment.

In this particular case, I was on a recent flight to the Turks and Caicos Islands – an on-board magazine article entitled *Tree of Death* caught my attention. It described a tree, growing on the islands, that was so toxic that the Guinness Book of World's Records ranks it as the “world's most dangerous tree”.



Manchineel tree fruit – Image: © Hans Hillewaert

Specifically, the species is known as **Hippomane Mancinella** (literally “little apple that makes horses mad”), a member of the Euphorbiaceae family, whose closest relative is the Poinsettia.

Also known as the **beach apple**, **manzanille de la muerte** (little apple of death) and arbol de la muerte (**tree of death**) it is found in Florida, the Caribbean and the Bahamas.

The species has a well deserved reputation: the spectrum of the tree’s toxicity is quite staggering.

Every portion of the **Manchineel tree** is toxic – even the nearby circulating air contains toxins, many of which have not been identified.

The sap is caustic and can cause severe dermatitis on exposed skin. Standing under the tree’s canopy in a rain storm can cause severe burns – even cars are not spared – their paint can be damaged from rain water dripping from the leaves.

The bark is full of a cocktail of toxins. In fact, smoke from the burning bark can cause temporary, if not permanent, blindness.

In addition, the tree’s fruit, if ingested can be fatal.

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Interestingly, the black-spined iguana and several species of birds are immune to the tree’s toxins.

The more I read about the manchineel the more I wondered how nature, on occasion, can make evolutionary mistakes. Specifically, for what purpose would a tree species evolve to the point that all its parts are toxic to humans?



The sum of all these parts made me realize that seeing one, in its native habitat, would be a fascinating experience.



Upon arrival in Providenciales, armed with my camera and a description of the tree, I started walking down the many unpaved limestone secondary roads lined with impenetrable bushes. Many of these bearing berries with a multitude of colours.

After several hours, with temperatures approaching 90 F and my only companions comprised of the occasional feral dog and small geckos scurrying in the underbush, I realized this was the proverbial “needle in a hay stack” quest.

‘... for what purpose would a tree species evolve to the point that all its parts are toxic to humans?’

Luckily, the next morning, I met Enorse Julesaint, originally from Haiti and currently working as a gardener at a nearby resort. Explaining my dilemma, he replied, “You mean the poison tree! When we find them growing near the resort we cut them down”. He added that they were still quite plentiful; however, one has to know where to look.



Manchineel tree

Having said that, the two of us headed down an unpaved road and directly into the bush. It didn't take long to locate three Manchineel saplings adjacent to a residential building.

"Don't touch the leaves", Enorse warned me , "they will burn your skin!"

At first appearance the the saplings looked unassuming – more like a spindally tree that I wouldn't think twice about brushing against or stepping over.

Standing close to these 12-foot saplings was a slight anti-climax. In my mind's eye I expected a menacing looking tree that was easily distinguished from its neighbours.

The take-away lesson from this experience is that nature is consistently surprising – even when it makes evolutionary mistakes!

For those wondering what the most toxic plant is – it is Florida's **spotted water hemlock** (*Cicuta maculata*). A quarter-inch of the stem contains sufficient toxin to kill a person.

I would like to thank Enorse Julesaint for his assistance in researching this article.

Images: Michael Walsh (unless indicated otherwise)



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Michael Walsh is a long-time Westmount resident. He is happily retired from nearly four decades in the field of higher education technology. A “professional student” by nature, his academic training, and publishing, include statistical methodology, mycology and animal psychology. During this period, he was also an officer in the Canadian Armed Forces. Prior to moving to Montreal, he was contracted by the Ontario Ministry of Education evaluating bilingual primary and secondary school programs. Today, he enjoys spending time with his (huge) Saint Bernard while discovering the city’s past and sharing stories of the majestic trees that grace the parks and streets. He can be contacted at michaeld2003@hotmail.com or through his blog [Westmount Overlooked](#)



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