

The Itzama Ethnobotanical Garden

Just a few miles north of Big Falls on the Southern Highway between Golden Stream and Indian Creek there is a very unusual botanical garden. The garden is called the Itzama Garden, or place of Itzamna, the Maya god of wisdom. It is a medicinal plant garden or ethnobotanical garden which was conceived and created by the local community of Maya traditional healers. This garden is a working area for the healers to grow plants for treating patients in the Kek'chi and Mopan Maya villages of Toledo. It is not a conventional botanical garden designed for visitors to see unusual tropical plants or ornamental flowers. Because of its non commercial use the garden is not developed to the level of most tourist destinations.

The healers are all elderly men and members of the Kekchi Maya Healers Association. They have transplanted approximately one hundred different species of medicinal plants into the garden from inaccessible areas of the Maya mountains. With the medicinal plants domesticated close by, the healers can now treat patients without having to go on long journeys to find the rare and unusual plants they need. The garden is a 75 acre forest and field site on the banks of Golden Stream. The garden was developed over ten years ago with formal organization by the Belize Indigenous Training Institute, the donation of land by the Government of Belize, and research by botanists at the University of Ottawa and medical scientists from Cleveland State University. Modest assistance from various donor agencies such as the International Development Research Centre (Canada) and the Naturaleza Foundation has allowed the construction of a road into the site, an irrigation system and a small traditional thatched building

used as a meeting center. One of the most important features of the garden is a ceremonial hearth, where the healers and a Maya spiritual leader conduct healing and cultural ceremonies. These include Maya calendar ceremonies, purification and curative ceremonies. The botanical garden is not a for-



Don Francisco Caal a traditional Mayan healer points out several plants used in the treatment of snake bites

mally laid out garden and the medicinal plants transplanted from the rainforest areas of the Maya mountains are growing under small shade trees in irregular rows. There are several paths through the garden which has different habitats where plants can grow in wet areas close to Golden Stream, through drier areas of forest and open field. The healers have provided special habitats for unusual plants on rotting logs or above ground places on trees. In the open area, they have planted fruit trees like soursop and guava or full sun plants such as lemongrass. Some of the better known plants at the garden are medicinal ginger which is used for treating stomach ache, alligators hand which is used for treating bites and bruises, cat's claw for inflammation and allspice tea which is used for treating digestive disturbances. Only a few of the plants are common species found around towns or other fields. Studies by the University of

Ottawa shows that almost all of the rest of the plants grown in the forested section that are used by the healers are exotic rainforest species that are part of the traditional knowledge passed down orally by the Maya. They are used in a wide range of treatments that are undertaken by the healers. They treat everything from sprains, bruises and athlete's foot to ulcers. Surprisingly, one of the main things that the healers have specialized in are botanical treatments for mental health. They have some thirty-nine different types of plant used for the treatment of epilepsy and anxiety related diseases. The healers are committed to ethical and safe treatments for patients and are working with the Universities and the Belize Ministry of Health to test and integrate traditional healing into first line health care. Maya youth from the Tumul Kin school at Blue Creek are also participating so that this ancient wisdom

can be passed on to the next generation.

Individuals and groups who are interested in this healing tradition can make an appointment to visit the garden. A brochure on commonly used medicinal plants is available and an advanced handbook is in preparation.

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