

# Ceiba Trees of Southern Florida

by Klaus J. Meyer-Arendt, Professor Emeritus, University of West Florida, 2021

## Introduction

The ceiba tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) is among the largest trees of the tropics. It grows naturally as far north as Cuba and Mexico, and it is considered the sacred tree of the Maya (ya'axché). The tree has been studied extensively in regard to its cultural geographic context by my LSU graduate-school mentor Dr. William V. Davidson. He has conducted detailed historical and modern surveys of ceibas in Honduras, Yucatan, and Quintana Roo (see [williamvdaavidson.com](http://williamvdaavidson.com)). Shorter surveys were conducted by Davidson in the Bahamas and Key West, Florida, both locales in which the ceiba has been introduced. This brief report on ceibas in southern Florida summarizes results of internet research coupled with two field surveys conducted in Spring 2021.

## Terminology

There is much confusion in the popular literature about the species of tropical deciduous tree known as the **ceiba**, known in Florida mostly as the **kapok** tree. Some of the confusion is outlined in the points below.

1. *Ceiba pentandra*. The (true) ceiba tree, also known as the kapok, silk-cotton, or **white silk-cotton tree** in Florida, is an introduced species that grows to 75-125 feet tall (up to 230 feet in the Amazon). It is broad, deciduous, and the trunk is typically buttressed. It flowers white or white-to-pink. Its seed pods are a source of kapok, a fiber once popular as a stuffing for mattresses, pillows, upholstery, life jackets, and insulation. It grows naturally in the tropical Americas and Africa (Figure 1), where it is hypothesized that the seed pods drifted ashore and the tree became established (Missouri Botanical Garden). The tree is in the Malvaceae family (as are all the other species listed below). The genus name *Ceiba* is

derived from the Taino of the Greater Antilles, and the species name has many synonyms, including the archaic *Bombax pentandrum* L.

Its introduction to Florida probably dates to the nineteenth century, and most likely the post-1865 period, when Florida first became settled by European Americans. Davidson traced the Nassau (Bahamas) ceibas to the late 1700s, and it is possible that seedlings were introduced to Florida from there. The tourism and railroad magnate Henry Flagler was familiar with Nassau as a tourism destination, and his gardeners at the Royal Poinciana in Palm Beach planted one there around 1887. Whether David Fairchild, a botanist and “plant explorer” for the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, introduced them in the 1890s is not known. But Fairchild and his wife later bought property in south Florida (Coconut Grove) in 1916, and ceibas were planted at his homestead (Kampong), in other parts of Coconut Grove, and (later) at the nearby Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden.

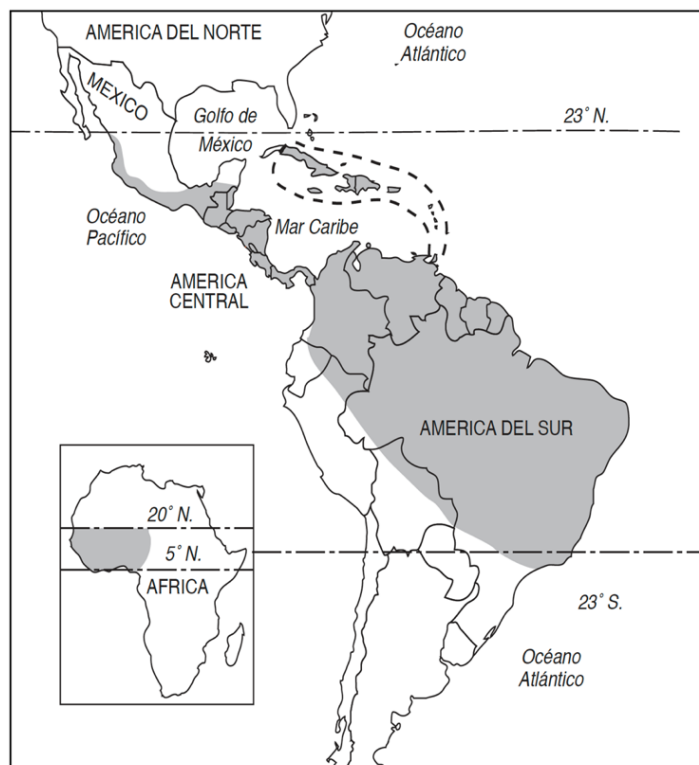


Figure 1. Global natural distribution of *Ceiba pentandra*.



2. *Bombax ceiba* (formerly *Bombax malabaricum*). This tree, also referred to as ceiba, bombax, cotton, silk-cotton, Malabar silk-cotton, or **red silk-cotton tree**, is native to the Asian tropics. Like the *Ceiba pentandra*, *Bombax ceiba* produces a seed pod that contains fiber. The term **kapok**, that originally referred to the fiber, is Malay in origin. Both species are called kapok, ceiba, and also silk-cotton tree, but only the *Bombax ceiba* flowers red (hence the more accurate term **red silk-cotton**



Figure 2. *Bombax ceiba* in Clearwater, FL.

**tree**, Figure 2) whereas the *Ceiba pentandra* flowers white or pink. *Bombax* is a more popular ornamental because of its red flowers. According to Richard Lyons Nursery, Inc., *Bombax ceiba* was first introduced in the USA in 1912 by Royal Palm Nurseries. However, a *Bombax malabaricum* seed, brought in from India, was planted in Clearwater, FL allegedly around 1870, and in 1957 the nationally renowned Kapok Tree Inn was established near it. The original Kapok Tree Inn closed in 1991, but the tree is still there. Two other Kapok Tree Inns were built in Florida, one in Madeira Beach (near St. Petersburg) and one in Davie (near Ft. Lauderdale on the east coast). At both of the newer franchise locations, *Bombax ceiba* was planted near their namesake restaurants. The Miami-based Richard Lyons Nursery notes that *Bombax ceiba* is often seen in southwest Florida, including Naples, Ft. Myers, Sarasota, and Manasota Key (although I noticed several in SE Florida as well).

3. *Ceiba speciosa* (formerly *Chorisia speciosa*).

This tree, also native to the tropical Americas, is known as the **silk floss tree** (and is often referred to as a ceiba or kapok). The trunk is more bottle-shaped than buttressed and exhibits big spines on the trunk. Such spines also appear, albeit less densely, on both *Ceiba pentandra* and *Bombax ceiba*.) The silk floss tree flowers pink and it also has a fiber-filled seed pod (Figure 3).

4. *Ceiba insignis*. Known as the white **silk floss tree**, this species is native to the western Amazon Basin (Ecuador, northern Peru). Like the *Ceiba speciosa*, it has a bottle-shaped trunk which has spines as well.



Figure 3. *Ceiba speciosa* in Miami, FL.

5. *Ceiba chodatii*. Also known as the **silk floss tree** (or floss silk tree), this species is native to Bolivia and the Chaco region of Paraguay and Argentina. Like the *Ceiba speciosa*, it has a bottle-shaped trunk. (Of the 18 species of *Ceiba*, one can see that there is much overlap in characteristics as well as confusion in names.)
6. *Cochlospermum religiosum*. In addition to *Ceiba pentandra* and *Bombax ceiba*, one other species of tree is referred to a silk-cotton: *Cochlospermum religiosum*, native to the Asian tropics. It has a similar seed pod filled with silky fiber which is comparable to—and often called—kapok.

A summary of the confusion, especially in regard to what species are referred to when using colloquial names, is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation of colloquial and scientific names.

name	species
ceiba, ceiba tree	<b><i>Ceiba pentandra</i></b> (synonym: <i>Bombax pentandrum</i> L.) <b><i>Bombax ceiba</i></b> (formerly <i>Bombax malabaricum</i> ) <b><i>Ceiba speciosa</i></b> (formerly <i>Chorisia speciosa</i> ) <b><i>Ceiba insignis</i></b> <b><i>Ceiba chodatii</i></b> + 14 additional species of <i>Ceiba</i>
kapok, kapok tree	<b><i>Ceiba pentandra</i></b> (synonym: <i>Bombax pentandrum</i> L.) <b><i>Bombax ceiba</i></b> (formerly <i>Bombax malabaricum</i> ) <b><i>Ceiba speciosa</i></b> (formerly <i>Chorisia speciosa</i> )
cotton tree	usually <b><i>Bombax ceiba</i></b> (formerly <i>Bombax malabaricum</i> ) <b><i>Gossypium</i></b> (cotton) <b><i>Hibiscus tiliaceus</i></b> (also known as cottonwood) sometimes <b><i>Ceiba pentandra</i></b> (syn.: <i>Bombax pentandrum</i> L.)
silk-cotton tree	<b><i>Ceiba pentandra</i></b> (synonym: <i>Bombax pentandrum</i> L.) <b><i>Bombax ceiba</i></b> (formerly <i>Bombax malabaricum</i> ) <b><i>Cochlospermum religiosum</i></b>
white silk-cotton tree	<b><i>Ceiba pentandra</i></b> (synonym: <i>Bombax pentandrum</i> L.)
red silk-cotton tree	<b><i>Bombax ceiba</i></b> (formerly <i>Bombax malabaricum</i> )
silk-floss (or floss-silk) tree	<b><i>Ceiba speciosa</i></b> (formerly <i>Chorisia speciosa</i> ) <b><i>Ceiba insignis</i></b> <b><i>Ceiba chodatii</i></b>
bombax, bombax tree	<b><i>Bombax ceiba</i></b> (formerly <i>Bombax malabaricum</i> ) <b><i>Bombax ellipticum</i></b> (aka <i>Pseudobombax ellipticum</i> ) + 7 additional species of <i>Bombax</i> occasionally <b><i>Ceiba speciosa</i></b> (formerly <i>Chorisia speciosa</i> ) rarely <b><i>Ceiba pentandra</i></b> (synonym: <i>Bombax pentandrum</i> L.)

One further source of confusion, not included in the table above, is the banyan tree. Technically the banyan is a fig (*Ficus*) that begins life as an epiphyte. Its seed germinates in a crack or crevice of a host tree (possibly a ceiba), then sends roots to the ground, somewhat like a red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*). Eventually the host tree



becomes hidden or “strangled” by the fig, hence the colloquial term “strangler fig”. The original banyan—*Ficus benghalensis*—is native to India, but today the term banyan refers to any of at least ten species of *Ficus*. Some are native to the tropical Americas, and at least two species—*F. citifolia* and *F. aurea* (Florida strangler fig)—are considered native to south Florida. The late Isabel Zucker of Lauderdale, FL, in a PowerPoint project for a plant course at UC/Davis, noted that ceibas (*Ceiba* or *Bombax*?) were sometimes referred to as banyans in Asia after serving as hosts for *Ficus* species. Whether ceibas or kapoks have served as hosts for *Ficus* species and ended up as banyans in Florida is not well documented, however (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The author and banyan tree, Hugh Taylor Birch State Park, Ft. Lauderdale, FL.

The rest of this narrative will address only the true ceiba—*Ceiba pentandra*—which in Florida is known primarily as kapok, less commonly as ceiba, and occasionally as silk-cotton or white silk-cotton.

## **Ceibas in Southern Florida**

As a result of this brief investigation into ceibas in mainland southern Florida, three broad categories of ceibas are identified: 1) planted ceibas in private gardens or estates, 2) planted ceibas in parks, and 3) ceibas relocated to public, commercial, or private sites. The first category includes the oldest ceibas, but many of the larger private estates have been preserved as tourist attractions, re-purposed as public parks, or subdivided. Hence, the original ceibas may survive as tourist attractions or as part of newer developments. This category also includes the newest (youngest) ceibas in the private garden landscape, as nurseries continue to sell the trees to private parties and developers. The second category comprises ceibas planted in parks for both landscape and preservation value, and also in parks created to produce a “jungle” landscape for tourists to enjoy. The third category is a recent trend, in which mature ceibas (at least 20 years old) are relocated to public parks, outdoor malls, and condominiums. The relocation of mature and exotic trees (not necessarily ceibas) is a status symbol for the nouveau riche. The cost of such relocation could reach \$250,000 US, but celebrities such as Julio Iglesias like mature unique trees to complement their Miami mansions (Court 2021, Clarke 2021).

### **Planted Ceibas in Private Estates**

#### **The Giant Kapok Tree of Palm Beach**

According to Treeware (treeware.com), which records the largest “champion trees” in Florida, the largest tree in Florida, of any species, is the ceiba tree of Palm Beach, locally known as the Giant Kapok (Figure 5). Treeware lists the circumference as 899 inches, a diameter of 23.8 feet, and a height of 74 feet. (While impressive, I am not sure it is bigger than the banyan shown on Figure 4.)





Figure 5. The giant kapok (*Ceiba pentandra*) of Palm Beach, FL. (late March 2021)

Although an article in the Palm Beach Daily News (2016) asserts that the tree dates to 1830, this is highly unlikely. European settlement in the area dates to 1872, and the shipwrecked cargo of coconuts that gave Palm Beach its name dates to 1878. The first hotel in the area—the Cocoanut Grove, which stood just beyond the tree as shown on the figure above—was built in 1880. Henry Flagler, the oil tycoon/railroad magnate/tourism entrepreneur, was a long-term guest at the hotel while he built his own hotels (such as the Royal Poinciana and the Breakers) as well as a winter house (Whitehall) for himself. The more believable story is that Flagler has his gardeners plant the ceiba at the corner of his property in 1887. The source of the tree is unknown, but Flagler had connections to Nassau, Bahamas. He undoubtedly stayed at the Royal Victoria Hotel, which has the stately ceiba in front, and in 1899 he built the Colonial Hotel (today the British Colonial Hilton). In the early 1900s, steamships would ferry

guests from the Breakers at Palm Beach to the Colonial in Nassau. It is quite plausible that a ceiba seedling was brought to Palm Beach in the 1880s.

### Hugh Taylor Birch State Park, Ft. Lauderdale

Hugh Taylor Birch State Park is a county park near the northern limits of Ft. Lauderdale sometimes referred to as the Central Park of Ft. Lauderdale because of its large expanse of green space. From the mid-1890s until 1940 this 180-acre property was the private estate of Hugh Taylor Birch, an attorney for Standard Oil Company originally from Chicago (who paid \$1 / acre for the land that originally had 3.5 miles of beachfront). Birch planted many trees, especially the large *Ficus* trees for which the park is known (see Figure 4). In 1941, the property was turned over to the state, and the state park was created.

The Institute for Regional Conservation ([www.institutionalconservations.org](http://www.institutionalconservations.org)), made up of a handful of volunteer or grant-funded botanists, has undertaken the task of inventorying plant species found on public conservation lands in various regions of the USA and its territories. The Floristic Inventory of South Florida is one such study, and the purpose was to not only identify what plants are growing but also to better manage such lands (i.e., remove to prevent aggressively invasive plants from harming native plants). This database, which covers ten counties of South Florida, identified *Ceiba pentandra* as present in three conservation areas: Hugh Taylor Birch State Park, Matheson Hammock Park, and Hattie Bauer Hammock (the last two in Miami-Dade County).

Before I used the GPS coordinates provided in the floristic inventory, I found only *Ficus* trees. Park horticulturalists told me that some of the *Ficus* species had buttresses. When I mentioned that *Ceiba* was an introduced species, the horticulturalists told me that non-native species were being eradicated. However, I seriously doubted

that a mature *Ceiba pentandra* would be removed. The GPS coordinates led me to a complex tree that appeared to be a blend of *Ficus* and *Ceiba pentandra* (Figure 6).

#### David Fairchild's Kampong, Coconut Grove

David Fairchild (B.S. 1888, M.S. 1889, Kansas State) was a botanist and “plant explorer” who traveled the world as an employee of the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture to seek out economically useful plants for introduction to the USA. His biography is well summarized in Daniel Stone's *The Food Explorer* (Dutton, 2018). The former military base Chapman Field in Miami was converted in 1898 by the Dept. of Agriculture to serve as a “plant introduction garden” for the many tropical species brought by Fairchild to the USA. (Whether some of the Key West ceibas documented by Davidson came from this “introduction garden” is not known.) According to Wikipedia, Fairchild also was instrumental in bringing cherry trees to Washington, DC, and introducing kale, quinoa, and avocados to the American diet. In 1916, he purchased an 8-acre waterfront parcel in Coconut Grove, where he would retire in 1935. He named his property Kampong (a Malay term meaning family compound). He turned this property into a garden filled with many exotic plants, including a *Ceiba pentandra*. Internet sources still list the ceiba as being present on the property.

On our visit, however, we found *Bombax ceiba* and *Ceiba speciosa* but no *Ceiba pentandra*. A staff horticulturalist informed us that the sole *Ceiba pentandra* was blown over during Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Although the age of the tree was not known, it may well have dated to the early years of the Kampong.



Figure 6. *Ficus/Ceiba* blend in Hugh Taylor Birch State Park, Ft. Lauderdale, FL.



### The Moorings, Coconut Grove

An upscale gated community near the southwest corner of Coconut Grove is well known for its giant ceiba just inside the gates (Figure 7). A sign at the tree's base lists 1929 as year of planting. The property was once two large waterfront parcels owned by Frank Church and Jessie Moore, founders of the adjacent Church of Christian Science (<https://therealestatecoconut.com/the-moorings-coconut-grove/>). In the 1920s, the elite subdivision The Moorings was carved out of these parcels as part of the national City Beautiful movement. The ceiba was evidently planted as part of the landscaping.



Figure 7. The *Ceiba pentandra* at The Moorings, Coconut Grove. (early May 2021)

### The Terrazas

An upscale condominium along the Miami River contains a large mature ceiba (Figure 8). This property is adjacent to Sewell Park, and both were apparently once part of a large private estate. The tree may well be close to 100 years old.





Figure 8. The *Ceiba pentandra* at the Terrazas, Miami. (early May 2021)

### Edison-Ford Winter Estates, Ft. Myers, FL

Thomas Edison built a winter estate in Ft. Myers in 1885, and his good friend Henry Ford built one next door in 1911. The properties are today run as one tourist attraction. Both Edison and Ford were friends of David Fairchild and were known to



visit him in Coconut Grove. One *Ceiba pentandra* on the Edison property was allegedly planted in 1910 (Figure 9).



Figure 9. The ceiba at Edison-Ford Winter Estates, Ft. Myers, FL.

The website Monumental Trees ([www.monumentaltrees.com](http://www.monumentaltrees.com)) lists a compilation of the largest trees in various states and countries, and the ONLY kapok listed for Florida is the Edison-Ford ceiba. The girth is listed at 4 meters. The Edison-Ford Estates website lists the height at about 100 feet and the (2015) age at around 100 years.

## The Role of Nurseries

All of the ceibas mentioned so far began on private properties. Some of these were planted over 100 years ago, back when many properties were quite large and when ceibas were just being introduced to the USA. Today most parcels are smaller but the trend of planting ceibas continues, either by private landowners or developers of subdivisions.

South Florida, especially from West Palm Beach to Homestead, has dozens of plant nurseries—both retail and wholesale—and several of these sell ceibas (various species, including *Ceiba pentandra*) and also bombax trees. One of the largest is Tree World Wholesale ([www.treeworldwholesale.com](http://www.treeworldwholesale.com)), whose owner and horticulturalist Guillermo Valenzuela assured me (via telephone) that there are many hundreds of ceibas growing in the south Florida area. He also stated that there are different “types” of *Ceiba pentandra*, some of which are smaller, less spiky and with different-colored trunks, and more suitable for smaller yards.

There is an excellent nursery—Rockledge Gardens in Rockledge, FL—near where we live in Cocoa. The knowledgeable horticulturalists there informed me that ceiba trees really survive only in Horticultural Hardiness Zones (HHZ) 10b (average winter low: 35-40°F) or higher (Figure 10). The trees are very intolerant of frosts and hence it won't survive winters in Cocoa or Rockledge. However, only a few miles to the east lies Merritt Island (just west of Cape Canaveral), which is tempered by water. Allegedly there are ceibas growing on private property at the southern end of the island but none were found during a field inspection (other than one unknown tree with buttresses). They may well be hidden behind vegetation or walls.



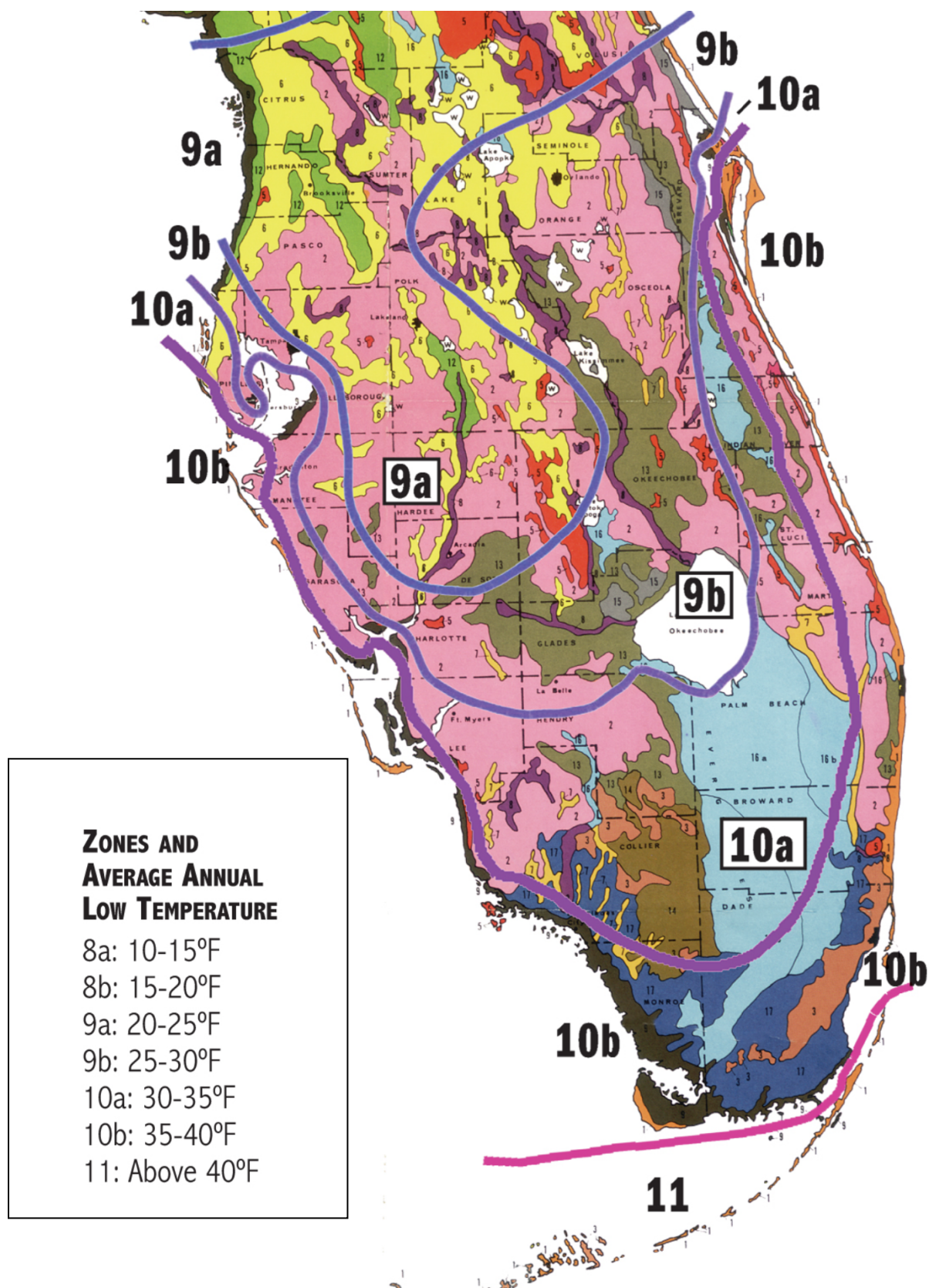


Figure 10. Horticultural Hardiness Zones for southern Florida.

## Planted Ceibas in Parks

The second category of ceibas comprises ceiba trees planted in public places. These include various types of parks and preserves as well as parks created for tourism purposes.

### Hattie Bauer Hammock Park (Orchid Jungle)

The oldest of these parks is what is today the Hattie Bauer Hammock Park, administered by Miami-Dade County. It encompasses the historic Modello Hammock, site of what used to be The Orchid Jungle. This was operated as a tourist attraction (since 1923, one of Florida's earliest roadside attractions) by four generations of the Fennell family and was mentioned in Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief*. The attraction did not survive Hurricane Andrew (1992) and closed by 1994. It is now a conservation area maintained by Miami-Dade County Parks & Recreation. A Historic American Landscapes Survey (2009) conducted by the University of Miami Architecture Department, is available online through the Library of Congress. The inventory of trees lists two silk cotton trees (*Ceiba pentandra*), and they are included on a map of the property. The day of our visit to the abandoned tourist attraction we found the park closed and fenced off for "restoration and enhancement" and hence could not verify the presence (let alone age) of the ceibas hidden within the "jungle".

### Matheson Hammock Park

Matheson Hammock Park, adjacent to the Fairchild Botanical Garden in Coral Gables, is a 630-acre (formerly 80-acre) county park. It opened in 1930 as the first county park in Dade County and benefactor William J. Matheson wanted the park to "preserve the wild and natural beauty". The park was extended into Biscayne Bay and an artificial atoll created. In 1936, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) developed most of the existent infrastructure.

The IRC Floristic Inventory identified this park as containing a *Ceiba pentandra*, and even provided GPS coordinates. I found lots of *Ficus* trees, including many with buttresses, but I could not find the ceiba. Perhaps a hurricane toppled it.

#### Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden, Coral Gables

Southwest of Matheson Hammock Park, in Coral Gables, an 83-acre botanical garden was established in 1936 by attorney/businessman/plant-collector Robert H. Montgomery. He named the Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden after his good friend David Fairchild who had just retired to his Kampong a few miles up the road in Coconut Grove. The botanical garden is today run by Miami-Dade County.

Many of the plants growing in the garden were hand-planted by Fairchild himself, although it is not known if these included ceibas. The garden website listed one *Ceiba pentandra*. Two were found, although neither looked to be particularly old (Figure 11). Perhaps Hurricane Andrew (1992) removed older ceibas.



Figure 11. The ceibas at Fairchild Botanical Garden, Coral Gables, FL. (#2 above Michele's head)



### Key Biscayne Village Green

Key Biscayne is the name of a municipality sandwiched between two public areas on the barrier island of the same name. The key was connected to the mainland around 1950, and lots were soon sold. The village green lies in the center of town, and two ceiba trees were found there, along with a *Bombax ceiba* and numerous gumbo-limbo trees. The oldest of the two ceibas (Figure 12) appeared to be about 40-50 years old. The Cuban caretakers (who spoke no English) pointed me in the direction of the second ceiba, and they raved about the ceibas in their homeland (where the trees allegedly had religious significance).



Figure 12. Ceiba in the village green, Key Biscayne, FL.



## Boynton Beach

After I returned home to Cocoa (central Florida) from my second field survey, I found an online article about a ceiba controversy in Boynton Beach, south of West Palm Beach (Hartz-Seeley 2019). In the public municipal core area of Boynton (as the mainland settlement was originally called), two mature ceibas were in the way of a major renewal/beautification project. The bigger and older of the two ceibas was removed in the name of progress, but a second one—near the old high school—was saved (Figure 13). Although these ceibas were not planted in parks per se, they were planted in public spaces. At least one survives.



Figure 13. Ceiba near old Boynton High School, Boynton Beach, FL

### **Relocated Ceibas**

The third category of ceibas comprises ceiba trees that have been relocated, most often to privately-owned public spaces such as shopping malls, but also to parks,

condominiums, and even private estates. This trend dates to around 2009 in southern Florida, and is the subject of recent articles in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Daily Mail* (Clarke 2021, Court 2021). These articles focus mostly on the nouveau riche and their predilections for mature exotic species of trees on their private estates. Sometimes these trees are imported from places such as Madagascar, but in other cases large trophy trees—including ceibas, banyans, live oaks, or baobab—may just be relocated from other parts of Florida. These big trees may have outgrown their living area (such as a suburban lot) or they are in the way of development (or redevelopment) projects.

This trend of tree relocation has created a niche opportunity for entrepreneurs. Two names that frequently pop up are Miami-based architect Raymond Jungles and landscaper Walter Acree. Jungles does much work for private clients, but he also designed the pedestrian Lincoln Road in Miami Beach. Acree, long established in the landscaping business, is a “tree broker” who finds and buys big trees—often surprising suburban homeowners with (up to) \$12,000 payments—and then relocates them for clients (who pay a lot more). Based out of a modest suburban home in Deerfield Beach, completely hidden in vegetation (including *Bombax ceiba* trees), Acree has acquired quite a reputation in southern Florida as a tree relocater. *Ceiba pentandra* trees have played roles in the designs and works of both gentlemen.

#### Lincoln Road, Miami Beach

Lincoln Road is a historic cross-island commercial street in Miami Beach. In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s it looked like a typical downtown shopping street with lots of stores, sidewalks, parking spaces, and a busy roadway in the center (Hunter 2020). In 1960 Lincoln Road became the first “outdoor mall” in America, and cars were replaced by pedestrians and a streetcar. In the 1980s, the streetcar was removed, and al fresco dining made the venue a popular destination for locals and tourists. By 2010, a new

image was needed, and Lincoln Road got yet another makeover. Architect Raymond Jungles wanted the pedestrian roadway to also be a greenway, and six bald cypresses, five live oaks, and one “Kapok *Ceiba pentandra*” were planted (Hunter 2020; Figure 14). When I visited in May 2021, I noticed many additional species of trees, and they did impart a park-like feel to what had once been a busy street. But I could not find the ceiba. The main maintenance worker (an Anglo) I talked to didn’t know about any ceiba, but his Cuban assistant knew all about ceibas. Yes, I had some on my property in Cuba, but there aren’t any here in Lincoln Road, he told me. Oh well. Maybe it took up too much space and was removed.



Figure 14. Ceiba (at left) on Lincoln Road, Miami Beach, FL, 2010 (Hunter 2020)



### Jade Signature Condominium, Sunny Isles

Another example of a Raymond Jungles project is the relocated *Ceiba pentandra* at the Jade Signature condominium in Sunny Isles, FL (just north of North Miami Beach). In late 2017, a 65,000-lb, 38-year-old ceiba was lifted into a tight spot above an underground parking garage of this high-end condominium (where units start at \$4 million) (PROFILEMiami 2017). The website (see References) links to a YouTube video that shows the installation of the tree. During a March 2021 visit, the tree still looked stressed, but it is surviving (Figure 15).



Figure 15. Relocated *Ceiba pentandra* at Jade Signature Condominium, Sunny Isles, FL



## Royal Park Bridge, Palm Beach

Walter Acree, the landscaper, promotes *Ceiba pentandra* on his company's website ([www.greenintegritys.com](http://www.greenintegritys.com)). The website shows examples of ceiba-relocation projects and ceibas rehabilitated and sold (Figure 16). One project entailed moving a *Ceiba pentandra*—by barge—to a small park at the east end of the Royal Park Bridge in Palm Beach (insets A, B, C, and D on Figure 16). The tree is now firmly established and no evidence of relocation is apparent, as seen on a recent Google Maps image (Figure 17).

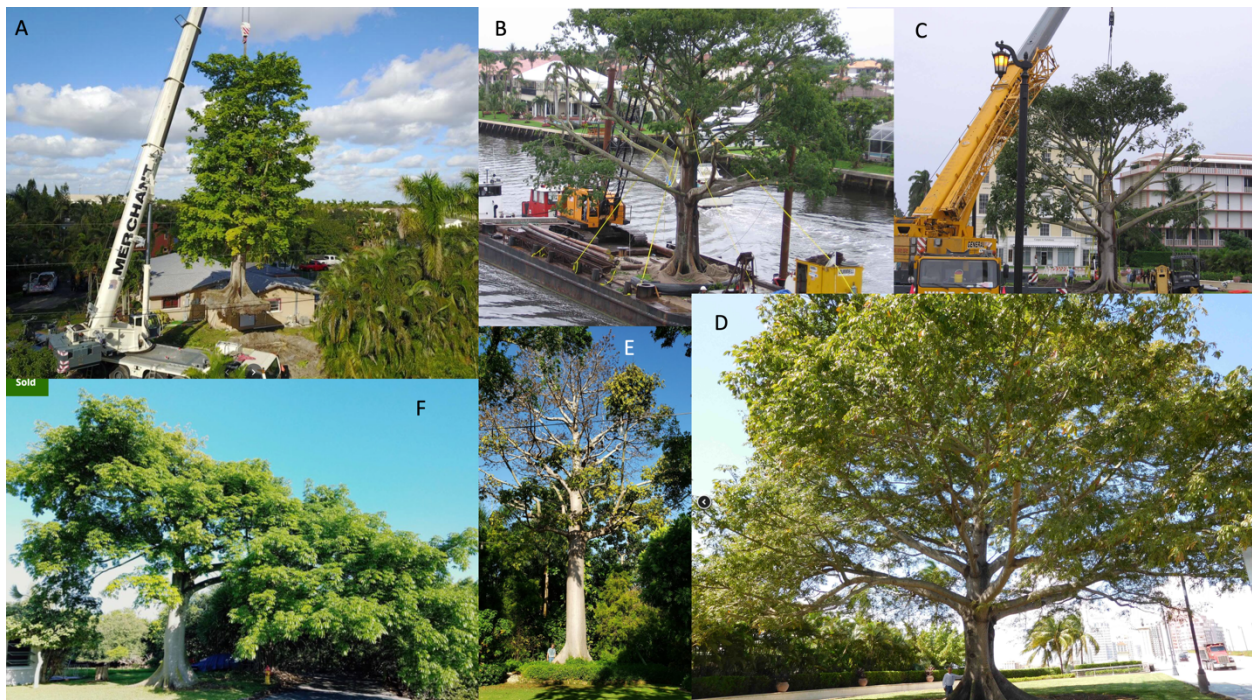


Figure 16. Photos from [www.greenintegritys.com](http://www.greenintegritys.com). A. Ceiba removal. B. Ceiba transport by barge, Palm Beach. C. Ceiba planting, Royal Park Bridge. D. Ceiba established, Royal Park Bridge, Palm Beach, FL. E. A rehabilitated ceiba (after relocation). F. A neighborhood ceiba (sold).



Figure 17. Relocated ceiba, Royal Park Bridge, Palm Beach, FL (Google Maps streetview image)



## Cocowalk, Coconut Grove

Cocowalk (or CocoWalk) is an upscale open-air shopping mall in the commercial heart of Coconut Grove. It was redesigned in 2020, according to a Jan. 2, 2021 article in the Miami Herald, and a new centerpiece was a 60-ft ceiba (Figure 18). It appeared stressed during my visit in May 2021: the leaves were turning brown and the buttresses appeared cut (perhaps to fit it when it was planted).



Figure 18. Relocated ceiba, Cocowalk, Coconut Grove, FL, 2021.



### Other Ceibas

Ceibas (*Ceiba pentandra*) are tucked away in many corners of Miami, especially in the leafy southern neighborhoods (e.g., Coconut Grove), Coral Gables, and along the Miami River. A Netflix series titled *Start-Up*, about a crypto-currency start-up venture and set and filmed in Miami, showed a ceiba tree at a Haitian gang house allegedly in Miami's Little Haiti (Figure 19).



Figure 19. Scene from Netflix show *Start-Up* (*Ceiba pentandra* at left, 2021).

No survey of ceibas in southern Florida is complete with mentioning two gastronomic sites named after the grand trees (Figure 20). Both the downtown La Ceiba Restaurant and the Ceiba wine bar (west Miami) are close to Coral Gables and Coconut Grove, where many of the ceibas mentioned in this report are found (and undoubtedly many more grow on private properties).

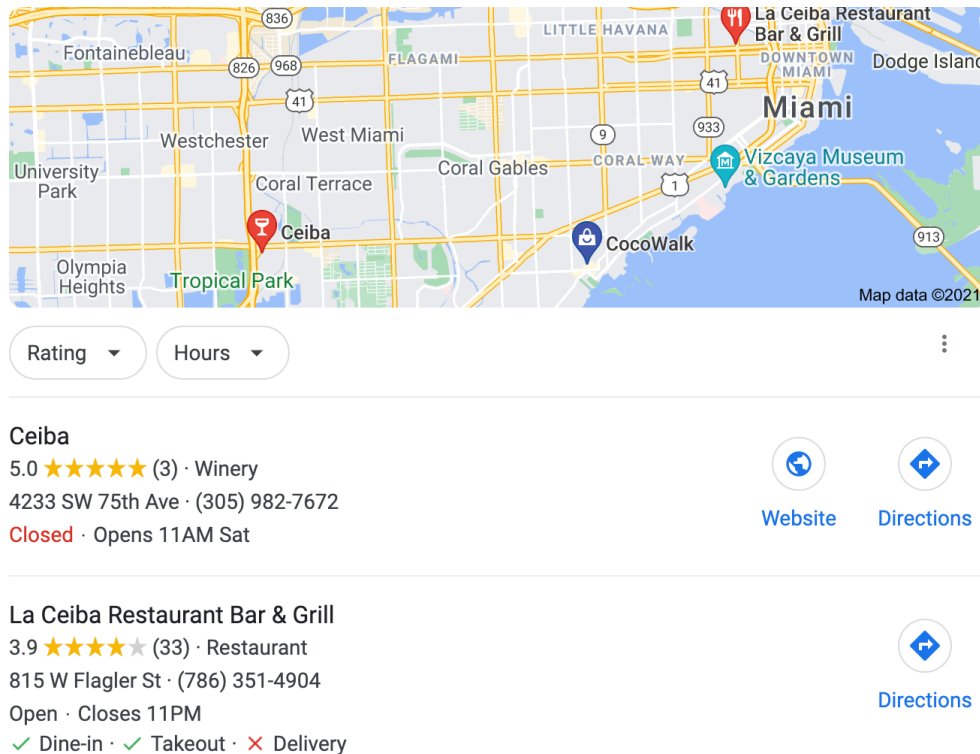


Figure 20. Gastronomic ceibas in Miami, 2021 (Google)

### ***Bombax ceiba*: The Other Kapok (or Ceiba)**

In the introduction, *Bombax ceiba* was listed as the species to which the word kapok—and often ceiba—is used. There is much confusion among the two species, especially by local-newspaper journalists. Even the Cocowalk ceiba looks like a *Bombax ceiba* and only when the tree flowers in spring can one be sure as to the true identity of the tree. On the west coast of peninsular Florida, the term kapok is overwhelmingly is used for *Bombax ceiba*, perhaps in part because of the rarity of *Ceiba pentandra* in the area. Nonetheless, a famous kapok tree next to the St. Petersburg Museum of Fine Arts, was erroneously described as a *Ceiba pentandra* on one website.

#### Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg

The Museum of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg was built and opened to the public in Spring 1965 (mfastpete.org). The *Bombax ceiba* was planted as a 3-ft-high seedling on the



museum's south side shortly thereafter. Today the 56-year-old tree is a big attraction (Figure 21), lit up at night, and drawing throngs of visitors in spring when it blooms bright red.



Figure 21. *Bombax ceiba* at the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, FL, 2021.

### The Kapok Tree Inn, Clearwater

As mentioned in the introduction, there were three Kapok Tree Inns in Florida. The original was built in Clearwater, adjacent to the *Bombax malabaricum* (later renamed *Bombax ceiba*) planted by nurseryman Robert Hoyt in 1870 in the orange grove and fruit stand across from his house (Comingore 2017). By the 1940s and 1950s, the tree had become a tourist attraction, especially during the spring bloom (see Figure 2). The property was sold to local businessmen Richard Baumgardner and Jim Jones, who opened the restaurant in 1957 adjacent to its namesake tree (RoadsideAmerica.com 2020). It ultimately contained 12 dining rooms, and the décor was a gaudy mix of Roman, Greek, and other Mediterranean influences.

But the restaurant was successful, and the owners of the Kapok Tree Inn decided to expand and open two more Kapok Tree Inns. The first was nearby, just in from the beach at Madeira Beach (although today technically in St. Petersburg). The second was in Davie, close to the Everglades inland from Ft. Lauderdale.

In 1983, all three restaurants was sold by the Baumgardner family to Clearwater-based property developer Aaron Fodiman (Lade 2015). Although Fodiman was primarily in the real estate investment business, he was allegedly intrigued by the Disneyesque feel to the restaurant, so he (briefly) became a restaurateur. (In 2015, Fodiman was owner of Tampa Bay magazine.)

In 1988, the Chicago Sun-Times called Kapok Tree Inn the number 15 restaurant in the USA, with sales of \$10 million (Creative Loafing Tampa Bay, 2019). The restaurant closed in 1991 but the property was bought by Sam Ash Music Stores. Part of the old restaurant serves as a venue for special events, and the gaudiness is still on full display. The 151-year-old *Bombax ceiba* still stands (Figures 22 and 23).



Figure 22. *Bombax ceiba* at the original Kapok Tree Inn, Clearwater, FL, 2021.





Figure 23. *Bombax ceiba* and author at the original Kapok Tree Inn, Clearwater, FL, 2021.

### The Kapok Tree Inn, Madeira Beach

The Kapok Tree Inn in Madeira Beach also closed around 1990 and is now the clubhouse for a gated residential community. A kapok tree still stands (Figure 24).



Figure 24. *Bombax ceiba* at the former Kapok Tree Inn, Madeira Beach, FL, 2021.

### The Kapok Tree Inn, Davie

The Kapok Tree Inn in Davie had a similar lifespan as the one in Madeira Beach, but there seem to be more website memories as well as information. This may be because it was the only Kapok Tree Inn in South Florida, and many now-middle-aged residents of the area have fond memories of heading out to this party restaurant at the edge of the Everglades (Lade 2015). The gaudiness—with Grecian columns, wandering peacocks, fountains, and elaborately furnished rooms—made the Kapok Tree Inn a popular venue for weddings as well as parties.

In 1990, Broward County bought the 157-acre property, and in 2008 it re-opened as the Long Key Natural Area & Nature Center. The core of the park is an elevated live oak hammock, and other than a fountain and few columns, little evidence of the Kapok Tree Inn remains. A modern visitor center occupies a site adjacent to where the restaurant stood. When I asked if any of the kapok trees still stood, I was told that the last one blew over in a hurricane a few years ago.

### **Summary**

Based upon internet research and field surveys in Spring 2021, the following preliminary conclusions are reached (see Figure 25 on page 32 for placename locations):

- There is much confusion as to which trees are ceibas and even which trees are kapoks (the Malay term). *Ceiba pentandra* and *Bombax ceiba* are the main two species known by these terms, and “kapok” is most commonly used.
- The true ceiba (*Ceiba pentandra*) does not tolerate frosts and is thus found only in Horticultural Hardiness Zones 10b and 11.

- Ceibas were introduced in the late nineteenth century, and both Henry Flagler and David Fairchild played roles in introducing them.
- Three general categories of ceibas were identified: ceibas planted on private estates, ceibas planted in public (or semi-public) areas, and ceibas relocated to public, semi-public, or (perhaps) private sites.
- There appears to be a shortage of old ceibas in mainland South Florida. The ceibas in Palm Beach and Ft. Myers are over a century old and a few others come close in age, e.g., the Moorings, Terrazas, possibly Orchid Jungle). Perhaps there were never many, perhaps hurricanes toppled them, or perhaps I couldn't find them.
- The ceiba is a stately tree (aka trophy tree, aka monument tree), and several large ones have been relocated to sites such as outdoor malls, public areas, and (perhaps) private estates.
- Several nurseries propagate (or relocate) ceibas, and it is estimated that there are at least several hundreds of ceibas growing on private lots or private housing developments throughout South Florida.
- Most ceibas are apparently in the better drained but also more heavily populated southeast Florida (Palm Beach to Homestead). On the west coast the Edison kapok is an attraction in Ft. Myers. But ceibas should grow well in west and (especially) southwest Florida (in HHZ 10b), and perhaps I haven't found them yet.
- The other kapok—*Bombax ceiba*—is known throughout tropical Florida, especially along the west coast. The original Kapok Tree Inn, built around a now-151-year-old tree, helped popularize appreciation of *Bombax ceiba*. This was reinforced by a kapok planted at the Museum of Fine Arts, and also two additional Kapok Tree Inns.



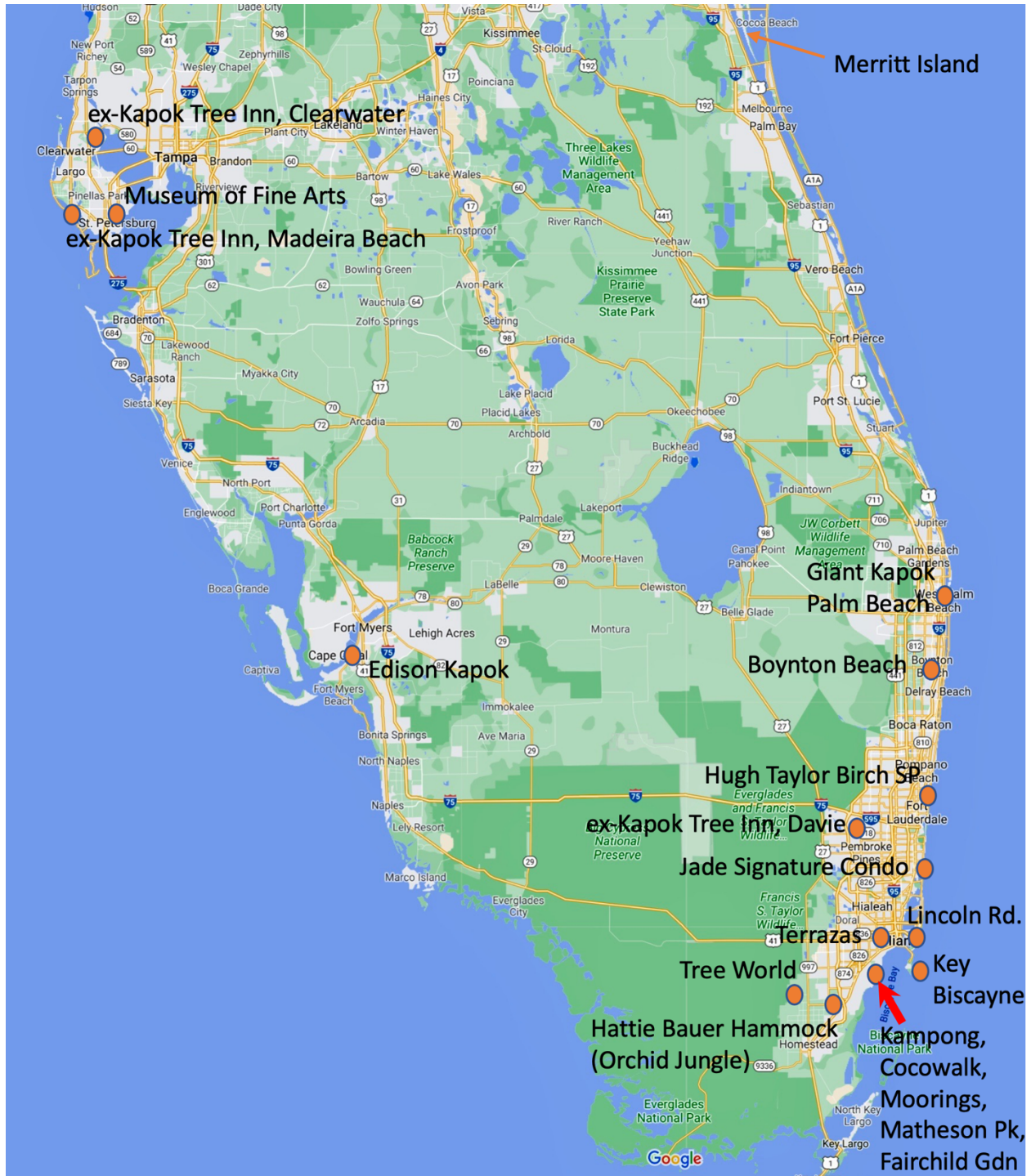


Figure 25. Key places and placenames mentioned in text.

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