They Have Saturdays and Sundays to Feed Themselves

Slave Gardens in the Caribbean

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In the tropical forest 2000 feet above the Caribbean Sea, Patrick Cartry chops the French weed from the sweet potato and dasheen patch in his garden on the slopes of a high mountain basin known as Gadinge (Fig. 2). Halfway down these green southwestern slopes of the old "Sugar Island" of Montserrat, the grey stone ruins of the windmill tower at Galways plantation jut through the forest. A wash of rain sweeps briefly across the small clearing, then the sun re-emerges and the shadows it casts indicate to Cartry that on this Thursday morning his six-hour stint of working his ground is drawing to a close.

Soon he and his friend Barzey will enjoy a mid-day meal of stew made with vegetables from the garden, and, for dessert, pineapple from Barzey's "pine field." Then he will load two crocus sacks of marketable produce—mostly sweet potatoes, christophenes, ginger, dasheen and Jimmynco beans—onto his donkey and set off down the mountain to his house in Morris village just above the sea. The two men have been cultivating at Gadinge for more than 50 years; they remember the excitement long ago when their mothers first let the 10-year-old boys come alone to the high forest to camp out for several days while tending the family mountain grounds. Now they set out together several times a week at three-thirty or four in the morning to climb Galways Mountain. Starting from the dry windswept slopes just above the sea, they pass through the grazing lands of lower Galways Mountain. At about 900 feet above the sea they enter a wetter zone.

Here tall trees can grow, while the intermittent well-drained sunny slopes of ravines are perfect for growing pineapples. Barzey's field is one his uncle first got the right to cultivate when he was working in the nearby cotton fields in the 1930s. Just above Churchyard Cave the men pass a tall dark stand of mango trees hung with philodendron and orchids. Black Mango is what people have called this place since their grandmothers' time. Then, after passing the ruins of Galways, they wend their way through a damp ravine—Hollop Gau— noted for its prolific breadfruit and Manee Apple trees, and turn steeply upslope past the overhanging "Nanny-house-rock," where their mothers often took shelter from the rain. At Cattle Spring they fill their water bottles, and after a steep climb they cross the Soufrière (a large active volcanic fumerole) at Beckra Dine (Fig. 3). They make the final ascent to the 2000-foot-high slopes of Gadinge, a location long valued for the cultivation of the sorts of plants that do best in consistently damp conditions: dasheen, christophenes, Hayti bananas, and ginger.


Charles Leslie. A New and Exact Account of Jamaica. (Edinburgh: R. Firth, 1790), 232

This drawing of the St. Kitts village of Cagin is by John Siborne, who traveled through the West Indies in the early 19th century. He frequently drew and commented on the plantations that slaves placed around their homes and the animals they kept.


2
The varied topography of the misty heights is preferred for mountain grounds. The different ecological niches serve the needs of the many species grown, and soil ridges control erosion.
Although it is January 1986, Patrick Cato and Abraham Barzey are continuing in a way of life that is in many ways similar to that of their distant slave forebears (Pulsipher 1986). Certainly they are freer to manage their own time, going to their mountain grounds at will. And they can choose to live on the land at the bottom of Galways Mountain near the main road, with piped water and electricity. Unlike the slaves, neither has to worry about securing the right to sell the produce of his labor; but both continue wary of the authorities because their mountain grounds are on Crown Lands that officially are not to be cleared of forest cover.

Like their great-grandparents, both men maintain plots around their houses and in several different mountain eco-zones; and they are intimately familiar with the requirements of the 40 or more species of plants they cultivate. Cato and Barzey put their garden produce to the same uses as their enslaved ancestors: they provide their families a balanced diet, they feed their pigs, goats, sheep, and chickens, and they sell the surplus produce and the animals in the markets on Saturdays. The complex of plants they grow, with minor exceptions, is the very same one grown by slaves in the late 18th century.

**Galways Plantation**

The ruins of Galways, once a sugar plantation, are located on the well-watered slopes of the Soufrière mountains on Montserrat Island in the eastern Caribbean (Figs. 4, 5). This plantation was home to hundreds of slaves during the 18th, 19th, and early 19th centuries. Here they worked long hours in the cane fields and performed the countless tasks that were necessary to produce for Europeans the newly popular luxuries of sugar and rum.

In the few hours during the week that Caribbean slaves were spared from forced labor, they managed to create a way of life for themselves that included the cultivation of complex tropical gardens. On many islands these slave-managed gardens were so successful that they not only afforded slave families a nutritious diet, but also provided small sums of cash which were used to alleviate the harsh conditions of the plantation system. Slaves sold their excess produce and thereby enhanced the diets of others, both white and black.

Although life was hard and many young from disease, the 18-year archaeological study of Galways indicates that the slaves there apparently did not suffer the nutritional stress that has been shown for slaves in Caribbean environments where gardening was restricted due to climatic conditions or to repressive plantation management (Corrigan et al. 1982, 1985). Not only do the human remains at Galways show that the slaves ate well enough to develop healthy bones and teeth free from signs of stress (Meadows 1989), but archaeological artifacts from the plantation village (Fig. 6) show that the slaves were able to provide themselves with material necessities and small luxuries such as tools, utensils, and dishes (Howson 1987). Quite likely these items were purchased by the slaves with cash earned through a variety of entrepreneurial activities, including tropical gardening.

Four main sources have provided information about the location, scope, and character of the Galways plantation associated with Galways plantation: (1) historical documents; (2) field analysis of human landscapes, including landforms and plant complexes; (3) oral tradition and folk geography; and (4) the study of present-day traditional cultivation practices. Historical documents from the British Caribbean as a whole and the results of our study of Galways plantation on Montserrat indicate that there were at least three types of slave-grown gardens: common grounds, ravine and mountain grounds, and houseyard gardens. Each has had a distinctive impact on Caribbean landscapes. The first type was plantation-managed, while the second and third were established and managed by the slaves themselves, sometimes surreptitiously, but usually with the express or tacit consent of the plantation management.

**Types of Slave Gardens**

**Common Grounds**

In the 17th century planters were actually required by law to see that a
certain number of acres of vegetable provisions were grown by and for the servants and slaves on each plantation.

All Masters of Families residing on this Island, shall cause or cause to be planted One acre of Provisions for every two working persons, Whites or Black, or their any of their Families (that is to say) Potatoes or Cassava [cassava], or both.

Laws of Montserrat, 15 June; see also 30 June.

Maps of plantations (Fig. 9) throughout the British Caribbean confirm that such fields, often called provision grounds, were consistently a part of plantation layout (Higman 1986). At Galways, though no maps survive, interviews with residents on the mountain showed that such fields were used for many of the same reasons as plantations in the Antilles. These whites were primarily freed Irish indentured servants who, it was hoped, would stay on Montserrat, thus bolstering the number of white settlers. Although, by law, slaves were forbidden to offer their produce for sale in the Sunday markets (Fig. 10) or in any other context, it is clear that the custom persisted; laws forbidding slaves to cultivate crops and to sell in Sunday markets were passed repeatedly well into the 18th century. The text of such laws often included the impossibility of stamping out the practice (e.g., Laws of Montserrat 112, 1336).

Ravine and Mountain Grounds

Slave-managed plots were grown sometimes perhaps as early as 1639, when laws were passed seeking to control the rambunctious behavior of slaves on Sundays. Later laws of the same type made it clear that the real point was not to keep the Sabbath, but rather to keep slaves from marketing surplus produce, partly because it was hard to tell if slave-sold produce was their own or stolen, but mostly because the entrepreneurial success of slave cultivators was putting white small-plot cultivators out of business. These whites were primarily freed Irish indentured servants who it was hoped, would stay on Montserrat, thus bolstering the number of white settlers. Although, by law, slaves were forbidden to offer their produce for sale in the Sunday markets (Fig. 10) or in any other context, it is clear that the custom persisted; laws forbidding slaves to cultivate crops and to sell in Sunday markets were passed repeatedly well into the 18th century. The text of such laws often included the impossibility of stamping out the practice (e.g., Laws of Montserrat 112, 1336).

Just where such slave-managed plots would have been located during the early years of colonization is not clear. Modern cultivators, who are free to choose the place and time for their work, usually have several plots, on the lower, drier lower slopes of the mountains at about 1000 feet above the sea and some in the cooler, shady upland zones above 2000 feet. Slaves, however, had little free time and often needed to work covertly, so most of their plots were probably in nooks and crannies around plantation fringes where the choice of ecological niches was restricted. In 1760, the plots were well out of sight of plantation managers, yet not too distant from slave villages. On mountainous islands such as Montserrat, they were often invisibly on steep slopes, either on the banks of ravines or on high volcanic fingers too narrow or precipitous for sugar cultivation.

In 1768 the location of such a covert garden at Galways was pointed out to me by several descendants of the people who once cultivated there. In a dramatically deep water course called German's Ravine (ravine), which borders Galways on the north, is a raised "island" consisting of 6 to 10 acres of gently sloping land surrounded by deep, heavily forested ravines. This formation, known as Little Island, was created when the mountain stream running in German's ravine divided and then rejoined further down slope. Today it is covered with a thick secondary forest of medium height, but that it was once cultivated is clearly indicated by the relic contour soil ridge created long ago to control erosion and enhance the environment for plants. While completely hidden from view, Little Island is no more than ten minutes from the Galways slave village.

Later, in the 18th century, when planters allowed slaves Saturdays, afternoons and Sundays to cultivate, it was possible for slaves to have gardens in more remote upland zones. William Beckford, writing about Jamaica, observed:

They generally make choice of such sorts of land for their gardens as are encompassed by lofty mountains; and I think that they commonly prefer the sides of hills, which are covered with rough stones, to the bottoms upon which they are not so abundant. Some will have a mixture of both, and will cultivate the plantain-tree upon the flat and their provisions

(root crops) upon the rising ground...

A Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica (London, 1790).

Historical descriptions from the wider Caribbean suggest archaeological evidence from Galways indicate that the tools and techniques used and the crops grown probably were very similar to those that survive in the mountainous grounds of today. The gardens were not only agamification of tropical plants brought from Africa (yams [Discoereae], okra, dashi, (Colocasia, pigeon peas, guinea corn), including several originally from Asia (banana, citrus, ginger), plants borrowed in the early years from surviving Carib and Arawak Indians (maize, peppers, pump-
10 Produce grown by slaves was sold by them during Sunday markets, which奴隶 knew as ‘gathering and color.’ This painting of a modern market in Guadeloupe echoes the past.

11 This 1985 map of Miss Jane’s yard in Kinsale, Montserrat, shows the arrangement of houses, plants and animal pens that is still common in the West Indies.

12 Perhaps over-romanticized by apologists for slavery, scenes of slave houses and the surrounding gardens are commonly found in the landscape painting of the plantation era.
Cultivating on high remote slopes early in the morning calls up feelings of freedom and independence, of affinity with nature. In the symbolized independence of Black people in landscapes where whites rarely tread. The cultivators feel close to ancestors who shared the same spots, and their labors give them the sense of prosperity that abundant food supplies bring.

The folk names attached to particular plots and to places along the path to the Highlands are identified as folk ideas (See Fig. 14). “My Land Gahait” carries obvious proprietorial meaning. “Cahoy Pooce” refers to Jim Cayce who long ago worked that parcel. “Vesper House” marks the remains of a slave village and calls up distant childhood memories of grandparent's stories. “Bucke E' Drie” humorously identifies the place near the unpleasant sulphur-smelling volcano where white folks inexplicably placed as an umbrella and as packaging, and the tendencies of which were used as fiber, as well as an absorptive and lemon grass, used as a medicinal tea.

The tools and techniques used in houngard yards were the same as those used in mountainous areas, excepting the care was given to maintaining fertility since only crop rotation, not plot rotation and fallow. The inventories of field management was less needed; but the moving soil-bank system described above was rather commonly employed for other advantages for soil and micro-climate management.

Beyond Economics

Although slave gardens originated in early colonial days, and mountainous and houngard yards were not the same. Slaves were taught by slaves to construct a decent life for themselves within a hostile system, these gardens remained important long after emancipation and, indeed, are still central in the subsistence economy of traditional West Indian people (Hills 1988). My conversations with present-day descendants of Caribbean slaves, who were taught early by their elders that gardens had a significance beyond their economic function.

Cayce sometimes exhibit a pleasing and picturesque appearance. Bryan Edward, The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British West Indies (London: John Stockdale, 1800)

These gardens were also portrayed in a number of contemporary sketches and paintings (Figs. 1, 2). They differed from the ravine and mountain gardens in that they tended to be in somewhat drier zones, were smaller in variety (as opposed to shifting), contained a less extensive and somewhat different complex of plants, and could be attended to and reaped from on a daily basis. Slave villages were nearly always located near the central works of plantations; therefore, the ecological zones common for slave villages were coastal regions or relatively flat upland flanks of mountains or interior valleys (Edwards 1973). Higman (1885) were because there were minimum moisture requirements for cane cultivation. Houstoun, houngard gardens probably were rarely in truly dry zones; but on low dry islands such as Antigua and Barbados, slave cultivators would have to cope with drought. Furthermore, cultivable land on such islands was at a premium, so all structures, including slave gardens, occupied land not best suited for growing cane. Similarly on Montserrat, slave villages were not on the best land, although it was probably better than that allocated to their neighbors on Antigua.

The reduced complex of plants due to the drier conditions and to the smaller garden spaces in slave villages. According to plantation maps and archaeological evidence, slave houses were normally only a few yards apart (Goodwin 1988). Illustrations and descriptions indicate that in all zones there were an important component of houngard gardens as they are today (Kinsher 1966), in part because tree crops were especially susceptible to the very dry and constant conditions. Elderly Montserratians tell me that in the early 20th century, ownership of valuable trees like mango, breadfruit was the preserve of the planter class, and laborers were punished for even fruiting off the ground. On the other hand, descriptions of gardens and of the slave-supplied market in Jamaica indicate that all types of fruit were grown by slaves (Long 1774, 2:105).

Chocobos were particularly valued, probably because of their many uses (food, fiber, containers), and in dry, sunny coastal zones coconuts tended to be the dominant tree species. Bananas and plantains were also popular, in part for the cool ambience in the plantains. Depending on the amount of shade and moisture, other plants in house- yard gardens included weeds, herbs, leaves, roots and tubers, legumes, medicinal, cosmetics, ornamental, weeding household chores or in making household items (Fig. 11). Examples of such plants included the "pot-scrub bush," a rough-leaved member of the Compositae family used to clean dirty dishes; "colita" (Sanse-vieria), whose fibrous leaves were used to make ropes, collars, and lashes for small animals; "Clintyy Bibby" (Aloe vera), used for burns and as an emetic; prickly pear cactus, and "shame" to thicken certain dishes; tobacco; "chancy bosh," a large- leaved phaladendron and as "shrine" to thicken certain dishes; tobacco; "chancy bosh," a large- leaved phaladendron and as "shrine" to thicken certain dishes; tobacco. "Shiney bosh," a large-leaved phaladendron which served as an umbrella and as packaging, and the tendrils of which were used as fiber, as well as an absorptive and lemon grass, used as a medicinal tea.

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Bibliography


