Native Plants of Haiti

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Introduction

Haiti, the western half of the island of Hispaniola, is defined not only by its vivid culture and history but also by its stunning and unique natural heritage. Despite facing substantial environmental and socio-economic challenges, Haiti harbors a remarkable diversity of native plants. It is, in fact, the second richest country in the Caribbean in terms of biodiversity, trailing only Cuba. From its rugged mountains to its lush lowlands, Haiti's vast range of elevations and climates has nurtured an exceptionally rich flora, making this nation a focal point for anyone interested in tropical botany, conservation, or natural history.

The country’s landscapes span an impressive array of ecosystems—humid rainforests, cloud forests, semi-arid shrublands, mangrove-dotted coasts, and highland pine forests. This environmental mosaic supports an estimated 5,000 to 5,600 vascular plant species, of which more than a third are endemic, found nowhere else on Earth. Such endemism is a testament both to the island’s ecological uniqueness and to its long evolutionary history, isolated from continental influences. Despite centuries of land use change and deforestation, pockets of native vegetation have endured, providing vital sanctuaries for rare and threatened species—some of which have only recently been rediscovered.

While the tale of Haiti’s flora is often dominated by accounts of loss—forests felled, species endangered, habitats degraded—there is also a story of resilience and hope. Historical works, such as the landmark 1931 *Flore d’Haiti*, as well as more recent discoveries from places like Macaya National Park, continue to expand our knowledge of the country’s botanical wealth. Local and international efforts are underway to catalogue, protect, and revive Haiti’s plant life, with special attention paid to endemic species and the vital role they play in culture, medicine, and ecosystem health.

Native plants remain at the core of Haitian identity for many. They are woven into daily life—not only as sources of food, medicine, and tools but as key figures in myths, traditions, and spiritual practices. For generations, knowledge about medicinal plants and their uses has been passed down orally, forming a cornerstone of community health in both rural and urban settings. This living relationship between people and plants underlines the importance of conserving not only species and habitats, but also the traditional knowledge that sustains them.

This book aims to provide an accessible yet thorough guide to the native plants of Haiti. By exploring their biology, ecology, cultural significance, and current conservation status, readers will gain not only an appreciation for the country’s botanical diversity but also an understanding of the many challenges and

opportunities facing Haiti’s natural heritage today. Whether you are a botanist, conservationist, student, traveler, or simply a lover of nature, this guide invites you to discover the extraordinary flora of Haiti, celebrating both its wonders and the urgent need for its protection.

CHAPTER ONE: The Land and Climate of Haiti

Haiti occupies the western three-eighths of the island of Hispaniola, sharing its borders with the Dominican Republic to the east. This position places it squarely in the Caribbean Sea, with Cuba lying to its west and the Bahamas to the north. The country covers an area of approximately 27,750 square kilometers, including its several satellite islands. While it may not be the largest nation in the Caribbean – that honor belongs to Cuba, with the Dominican Republic coming in second – Haiti holds its own with a diverse and dramatic landscape. Its name, fittingly, is derived from the indigenous Taíno word "Ayti," which translates to "land of high mountains." Anyone who has traveled through Haiti will attest to the accuracy of this ancient description; the terrain is predominantly rugged and mountainous, with over three-quarters of the land sitting above 700 feet (210 meters).

The topography of Haiti is a captivating mix of soaring peaks, fertile valleys, and limited coastal plains. This varied relief is a direct consequence of the country's location on the boundary between the Caribbean and North American tectonic plates, a geological setting that has shaped the island over millions of years through seismic activity, erosion, and weathering. The result is a landscape that is both breathtaking and, at times, challenging.

Dominating the Haitian landscape are several major mountain ranges that run generally from east to west. In the north, you find the Massif du Nord, an extension of the Cordillera Central in the Dominican Republic. This range stretches from the eastern border northwest through the northern peninsula and is known for its rugged terrain, deep valleys, and what remains of its dense forests. Further to the southwest of the Central Plateau are the Montagnes Noires, whose northwestern part merges with the Massif du Nord.

In the south, the landscape is defined by the mountainous southern peninsula, also known as the Tiburon Peninsula. Here lies the Chaîne de la Selle mountain range, which is a continuation of the Sierra de Baoruco in the Dominican Republic. This is home to Haiti's highest point, Pic la Selle, which reaches an elevation of 2,680 meters (8,793 feet) above sea level. The western extension of the Chaîne de la Selle on the southern peninsula is called the Massif de la Hotte, with its highest point being Pic Macaya at 2,345 meters. These southern ranges are particularly important for their unique biodiversity.

Between these mountain ranges lie Haiti's valleys and plains. The Plaine de l'Artibonite, situated south of the Montagnes Noires, is considered the most important valley for agriculture and is home to the Artibonite River, the longest river on

Hispaniola. This river originates in the Dominican Republic and flows through central Haiti before emptying into the Gulf of Gonâve. The Plaine du Cul-de-Sac in the southeast is a natural depression that contains saline lakes, including Haiti's largest, Lac Azuei (also known as Étang Saumâtre). These lower-lying areas, while limited in extent compared to the mountains, are the most productive agricultural lands and consequently, the most densely populated.

Haiti's coastline, stretching for 1,771 kilometers (1,100 miles), is irregular and features a long, slender southern peninsula and a shorter northern one, separated by the Gulf of Gonâve. Within this gulf lies Gonâve Island, a significant island part of Haiti. Other islands belonging to Haiti include Tortuga Island off the northern coast, historically known as a haunt for pirates, and Île à Vache off the southwestern tip. The coastal areas encompass deltas, estuaries, coastal plains, and lagoons, providing a variety of habitats.

The climate of Haiti is predominantly tropical, characterized by warmth and humidity throughout the year. However, elevation plays a significant role in modifying temperatures. Coastal and lowland areas are generally hot, with average temperatures in Port-au-Prince ranging from around 23°C (73.4°F) in January to 35°C (95°F) in July. Inland plains can experience even higher temperatures. As you ascend into the mountainous regions, the temperatures become more temperate, and frost can even occur at the highest elevations during winter. For instance, the village of Kenscoff, at about 1,430 meters (4,700 feet), has a significantly lower average temperature than the capital.

Rainfall patterns are highly varied across the country, influenced by the mountainous topography and the prevailing trade winds. Haiti is located on the leeward side of Hispaniola, meaning it receives less direct influence from the humid trade winds compared to the Dominican Republic. Generally, there are two rainy seasons: April to June and October to November, with peaks typically occurring in May and October. However, this can vary by region. The northern and eastern slopes of the mountains, as well as the southern peninsula and northern plains, tend to receive heavier rainfall. The western coast, including the area around Port-au-Prince, is relatively drier. The driest regions are often the Plaine du Gonaïves and the eastern part of the Plaine du Cul-de-Sac. Annual rainfall can range significantly, from as low as 550 mm in the lowlands to 1,200 mm in the mountains.

While the climate is generally tropical, Haiti is also susceptible to natural hazards. Located in the middle of the North Atlantic hurricane belt, the country is regularly impacted by tropical storms and hurricanes between June and November. Periodic droughts and floods, often exacerbated by deforestation, also pose significant challenges. Despite the environmental pressures and natural vulnerabilities, this complex interplay of geography and climate has created a mosaic of habitats that supports Haiti's remarkable and diverse native plant life.

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