



THE AMAZING CALABASH OF GUYANA

By Dmitri Allicock

The calabash was one of the first cultivated plants in the world, grown not primarily for food, but for use as a water container. The bottle gourd may have been carried from Africa to Asia, Europe and the Americas in the course of human migration.



This tough prehistoric stubby looking tree belongs to the family Bignoniaceae and is rarely seen much taller than 15 feet with a leafy canopy that provide a natural shady cool playground for Guyanese children.

The light green calabash flower of five petals fuses into a funnel shape that give birth to large spherical fruits of more than one foot in diameter. The hard shell of the fruit encloses an acrid smelly whitish pulp and thin dark brown seeds.

The fruits of the calabash appears to have no formal order and are found growing from trunk to branch. Both the shell and gut of the fruit have been adapted to many useful purposes in Guyana.

The shell provided valuable uses for our ancestors and is still a part of life within Guyana's interior. This natural Tupperware is prepared by simple cutting the calabash to the specification of its purpose and scoping out the gut and then allowing for drying in the sun.



Water can be carried and stored by the gourd, providing a cool refreshing drink. Amerindians still uses the calabash for piwari drinking and as a utensil of the kitchen. Mothers use it for bathing children, river boats are usually outfitted with the readily available calabash for bailing out water. The calabash is very popular with the Rastafarian community of Guyana.

A growing trend is the use of the calabash as a decorative work of art. The artist chooses a calabash to suit the size and shape of the product then designs and images are engraved into the green shell

with a sharp instrument. The fruit is then cut by a saw before cleaning out the mass of fruits and seeds. The shell is left to dry in the sun before finishing touches of polishing, beads, leather, etc. and application of colors are applied. These pieces of art and symbols of Guyana's rich cultural life and history are hot commodities within the diaspora and are in much demand. My collection of calabash art of Guyana is displayed above on my wall.

The pulp of the fruit has medicinal properties and acts as a remedy for respiratory problems such as asthma and cough. It contains hydrocyanic acid which is considered as a purgative. The syrup prepared from the pulp is used as a medicine for relieving disorders of the chest or respiratory tract and also to cure dysentery and stomach aches.

It is said that the white pulp cures dog mange and is good for keeping cows free of parasites when applied topically.

The leaves of the Calabash Tree are used to reduce blood pressure. The decoction of the tree bark is used to clean wounds and also to treat hematomas and tumors. It is said that the fruit of the Calabash Tree when roasted is a good treatment for menstrual cramps or to induced childbirth and that the leaf can be used in tea to treat colds and headaches.