

PLANT PORTRAITS

Bo Tree

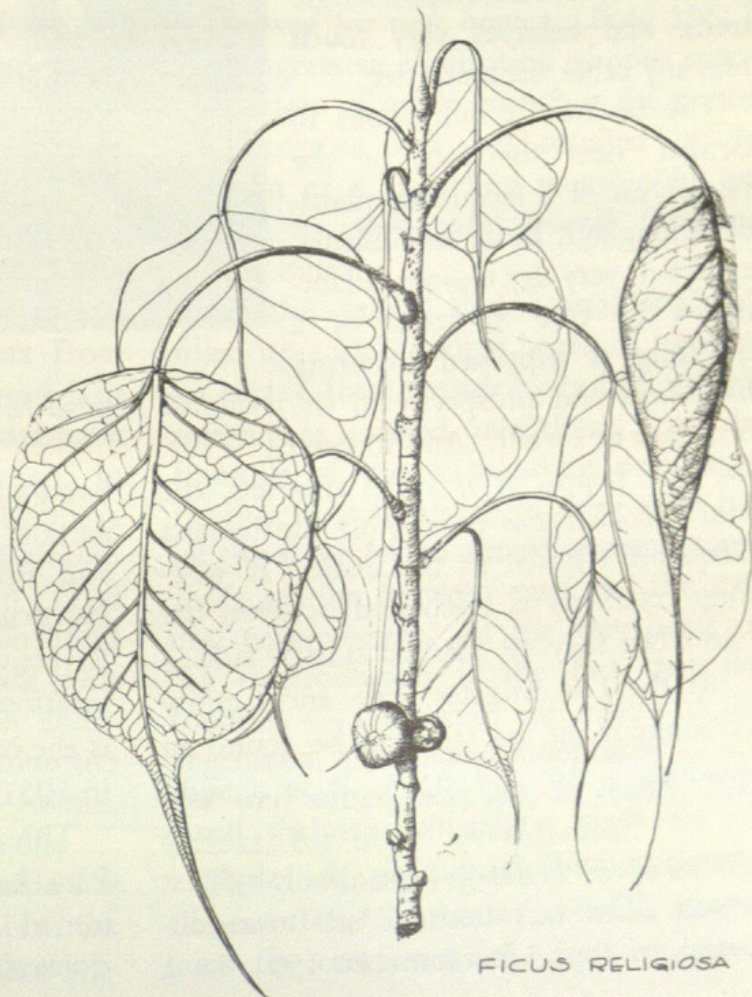
Leonid Enari

ACCORDING to tradition, it was under a bo tree in the village of Uruvala (now Buddh Gaya) in central Bihar in northeast India, that Siddhartha, an Indian prince, meditated for seven weeks on a couch of grass, facing the east, until he obtained enlightenment and perfect knowledge of Nirvana, from which time he became known as Buddha. This may or may not be true, except that Siddhartha existed, lived about 2,500 years ago, was the son of a rajah, and is the founder of Buddhism, a religion which originated in India and later spread to China, Burma, Japan, Tibet, and parts of southeast Asia.

The bo tree, or the peepul tree as it is sometimes called, is held sacred both by Buddhists and by the Hindus. It is considered a sin for any devotee to cut it down, harm it, or utilize a part of it in any manner. When Dr. W. S. Stewart, the former director of the Los Angeles State and County Arboretum, visited the famous bo tree of Buddh Gaya in 1964 and sought permission from the superintendent to take a cutting for the Arboretum, his request was politely but firmly refused. Instead, he was given a few dead branches and leaves already separated from the tree by wind.

The bo tree is a large, spreading tree that grows to 100 feet. The trunk is short, erect, and, on old trees, with ridges, knobs,

and hollows. The branches are long, crooked, and spread widely in all directions. The lower branches are nearly horizontal and are sometimes supported by thick roots that serve as additional trunks. The bark is fairly smooth and grayish and peels off in roundish flakes of irregular size. The leaves are somewhat egg- or heart-shaped, smooth, deep-green above but paler beneath, shiny, leathery, with long pointed tails and slender pendulous stalks. They are adapted for life in very wet climates because the tail causes raindrops to drain away quickly



FICUS RELIGIOSA

from the surface of the leaf, thereby allowing it to resume its respiratory functions soon after the rain stops. The receptacles (figs) are small, purplish-black when ripe, and much liked by birds. As its Latin name, *Ficus religiosa*, indicates, the bo tree is a species of fig.

The figs are eaten by birds, squirrels and monkeys which drop the seeds on the branches of other trees, where they germinate and grow. The host tree, which at first supports the intruder, eventually is strangled by its strong encircling roots and succumbs. This does not mean that the bo tree is a parasite. It takes no food from the host tree, relying on air and rain until its roots reach the ground. When the seeds germinate in the ground, the tree develops a single trunk and behaves very much like any other ordinary tree.

The bo tree is indigenous to Bengal, near the foot of the Himalayas. It is frequently planted throughout India and Burma, except in very dry regions. Planting a bo tree in front of a dwelling is supposed to bring happiness and prosperity to the occupant or owner. And to keep the tree happy, it is often married, the nim (*Azadirachta indica*) or the banana frequently chosen as the bride. A wedding ceremony is celebrated between the two when they are planted side by side.

At the Los Angeles State and County Arboretum the bo tree can be found in quadrats L/10 and O/13. It is a sight to see their poplar-like pendant leaves fluttering and dancing in the slightest breeze. The accession in 1/10 was donated to the Arboretum in 1951 in a

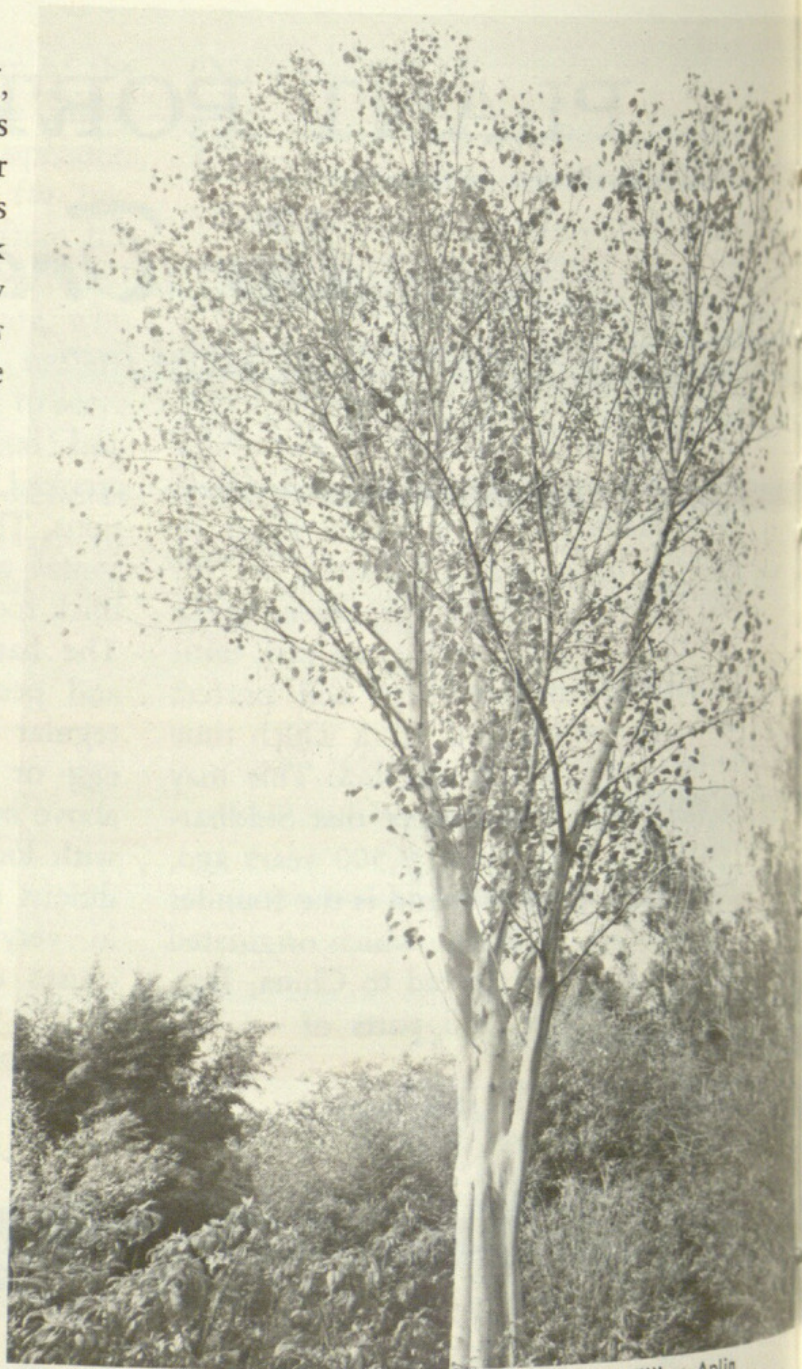


Photo by William Aplin

Bo tree located in Tropical Garden atop Tallac Knoll.

five-gallon container by Dr. Ira J. Condit, author of "Ficus, The Exotic Species" and Professor Emeritus, Department of Horticulture, University of California, Riverside. It was planted in the present location in 1952. The accession in O/13 is the cutting taken from the donated tree in 1951.

The author is much indebted to Mrs. Paty Lawson, a member of the Arboretum's Las Voluntarias, for the drawing she made for this article.



Enari, Leonid. 1975. "Plant portraits: Bo tree." *Lasca leaves* 25, 13-14.

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