

## Seven Things You May Want to Know About Banyans

Diane Gottlieb

1. Banyan trees, or *Ficus benghalensis*, if you want to get technical, are remarkable beings of grace. They're the largest of the ficus genus and native to India, where they hold the honor of national tree. They can also be found in South Florida.

I live in southern Florida. I may or may not be a remarkable being, and I'm not very large, but I have been known to carry myself with some grace. I pass several Banyans on my daily walk around the loop surrounding my 55+ community, where I also see a variety of ducks and lizards and people with gray hair.

2. The Banyan tree has deep, long roots that also spread wide above ground. Aerial roots, too, hang down from its branches. Some appear to be thick ropes, others extra trunks.

I stop to observe those roots, broad and strong, reaching below, across, and above. I feel honored, witnessing the tree's connection to the earth, awed that rich soil and sunlight are what feed this massive beauty. The Banyan: it's so confident, so firmly grounded. I'm jealous. It asks no questions, while I hold so many. I look at its powerful limbs, its aerial roots and wonder what it might be like to sprout roots into the air. My own family lineage grew in the dark underground, fed from so many secrets, most of which have never seen the light of day.

3. Older, huge individual trees have been known to extend themselves out and cover as much as an acre.

A small forest alive in one tree.

4. Ficus is a genus of about 850 species of woody trees, shrubs, and vines. The word "ficus" is Latin and means "fig." Benghalensis hails from Bangladesh. The tree's common name, Banyan, resembles "banians," the name given to Hindu traders who set up their stalls in the shade of these glorious trees. Banyans are sacred symbols of fertility and life.

My name, Diane, comes from Latin too, meaning one or all of these: "to shine, sky, heaven, god." One must not forget Diana, the ancient Roman goddess of childbirth, the hunt, and the forests. I've always suspected there was some goddess in me, and, on my best days, I might reflect the divine. Fertility. Forests. I like that. Maybe there's some Banyan in me too.

5. Banyan trees, according to Hindu traditions, are thought to have the power to fulfill people's wishes.

Maybe tomorrow, I'll wish on a tree.

6. The Banyan has practical uses as well. In addition to providing shade, twigs are sold as toothpicks in India and Pakistan.

Toothpicks!

7. And after the British colonized India, they used Banyans as gallows\*. On one day in 1857, during India's first war of independence, the British hanged 257 rebels from the branches of a single Banyan tree. Legend holds that it took seven attempts to execute the Indian rebel Amar Shahid Bandhu Singh from a sacred Banyan tree. When he finally died, the story goes, the tree began to bleed.

I wonder if you could hear the tree cry.

\*<https://underthebanyan.blog/2018/04/12/the-trees-of-life-that-became-agents-of-death/>