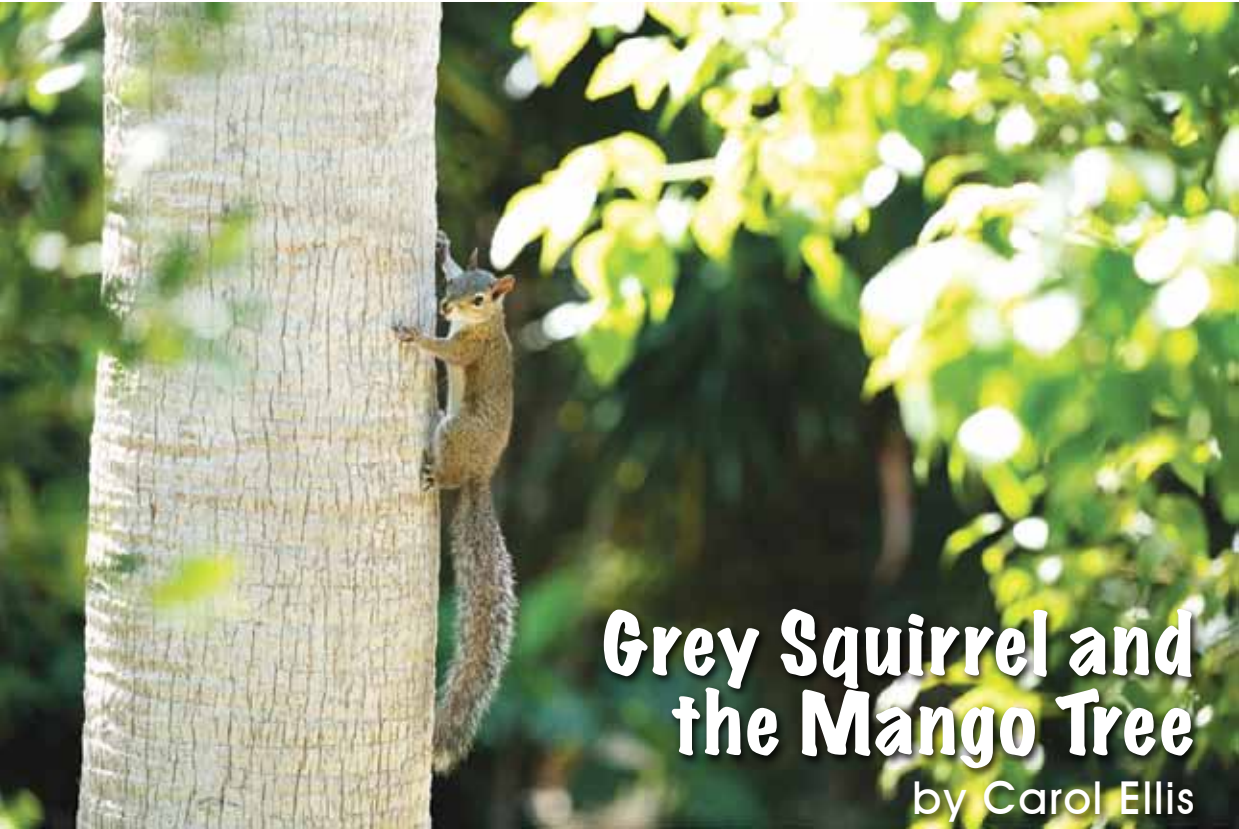




Squirrels move around with reckless ease, as if the gravity does not apply to them.

Summertime is tropical fruit time. It is hot and humid, too much for most plants, and humans. Those of us who are here get the sweet reward of mango season.

My mango tree is Valencia Pride variety, purchased at Fairchild Tropical Gardens. They recommended it as a good variety for Key Largo. It produces in June/July and gets rave reviews from everyone who has tasted the fruit.



My prize mangos begin to turn from solid green to shades of yellow gold and reddish orange as they ripen on the tree.

In fruit season, I monitor the tree daily, checking for mangos that may be on the verge of ripeness. The object is to pick the fruit before the resident grey squirrel finds it. One day in late June I spied a grey squirrel near the mango tree. At the same moment the squirrel, who was just a short leap away from the mango tree, stopped in its tracks. It heard me and it remained motionless in an attempt to hide from sight.

Some fruits were showing signs of ripeness, so I picked a half dozen that were a few days shy of being perfectly ripe. Valencia Pride mangos have a color change from their unripe solid green state, to yellowish gold and reddish orange as they ripen. The fruit is considered mature when the end of the fruit away from the stem broadens out. Luckily the fruit ripens in stages, which allows the fruit to stay on the tree until you are ready for the next batch.

My bushy-tailed rodent visitor will get its share of fruit, no matter how vigilant I am. It will find a fruit and nibble on it, then move onto another fruit and do the same. Squirrel proofing your fruit trees is not

impossible. Some people wrap their tree in netting. Others set out motion-activated sprinklers. One year I wrapped each hanging fruit in a brown paper bag. That was crazy, and labor intensive, and I couldn't see the fruit when they were in the bags. I'd go out there and find a paper bag with a mushed fruit in it on the ground. I kinda feel sorry for the squirrels, and I would never do harm to the one or two that come visit. One way to lessen their impact is by cleaning up any downed and rotting fruit and by providing an alternative food source. Unfortunately birds and squirrels share the same diet, so you may be faced with squirrels raiding the bird feeder.



This squirrel is making noise, flicking its tail because I was near the tree and it viewed me as a threat.

Squirrels are common visitors in the urban landscape, so much so that we seldom pay attention to them. My yard is just one stop on a circuit which spans from tree to tree in its neighborhood range. The local squirrels never have to leave the treetops in order to get to my yard. Squirrels get hit by cars when they cross the road. The iNaturalist database is full of pictures of "flat squirrels" with the sighting location as Crocodile Lake/Card Sound Road, a fragmented habitat with a 55-mph highway running through the middle of it.

Squirrels/Mango Tree... CONTINUED - Photos by Carol Ellis



The squirrel stops in its tracks, just a short leap away from the mango tree. It heard me and it remained motionless in an attempt to hide from sight.

Since the squirrel spends much of its life in the trees, it's obviously very good at navigating from tree to tree in search of its food. It's like an arboreal super-highway. On gardening day we were trimming the green and silver buttonwood hedge running the length of the backyard. It is a mature hedge with many thick connecting branches. The squirrel had a path along the border, and the daredevil squirrel regularly leapt from branch to branch on its path. On this day we heard a crash, and something tumbling through the foliage. Much bigger than a golf ball, I thought. The next thing we saw was a squirrel emerging from the brush, and the look on its face was priceless, as it processed what had just happened. The squirrel looked at me as if to say "Are you responsible for this?" The squirrel had mindlessly leapt for a branch that had been recently removed, an unexpected alteration to it's world.

The squirrel also gets a bad rap for being forgetful. Squirrels are credited for planting many oak and walnut forests, as they bury their food cache for later, and then forget that they did so, and the resulting forests grown from the seeds are attributed to squirrels.

The year 2026 produced a bumper crop on my mango tree, and I felt superstitious, since the last prolific crop on my property was in 1992, the summer that hurricane Andrew decimated North Key Largo, Homestead and vicinity. That June before we lost the tree in the August hurricane, my mother-in-law Helen's mango tree was loaded with fruit. I peeled and chopped the fruit, and helped her make several cases of mango chutney, using the original Hayden recipe. To this day I label my mango chutney "Mrs. Atkinson's" as a tribute to Helen Atkinson Ellis.



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Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.



A squirrel's front teeth are always growing, so they must constantly keep chewing to wear them down so they don't grow into their lower jaw. Their preferred foods include bark, berries, seeds and acorns.