

# Blue bottle trees in garden date back centuries

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Throughout the South, now creeping northward, you may have seen bottle trees in gardens. Often these are constructed of welded iron bars (rebar) with bottles, usually blue. The oft-repeated story is that bottle trees originated in the Congo and were brought over by African slaves, but the story is much more ancient than that. For the full story, I am indebted to Felder Rushing, who has exulted in the fun and whimsy of Southern Garden Art (<http://www.felder-rushing.net>).

From the time that clear glass was invented circa 2000 years ago, tales originated that spirits lived in bottles, probably from the sounds that wind makes when passing over the bottle openings. This led to the belief of bottle imps or genies (remember Aladdin and his magic oil lamp?). From this, it was a simple slide into the belief that glass balls and bottles could capture roaming night spirits.

This permeated folklore from the Arabian Peninsula to Eastern Europe and Africa. To the U.S., the Europeans brought their "witch balls," hollow balls with an opening to capture witches, and "gazing balls," to repel witches. The Africans brought their glass bottle trees.

Variations exist on the simple bottle tree, but all are basically a "bottle on a stick." The trees may be a complex iron tree, a simple

dead tree (red cedar and crape myrtle seem to be popular), the tips of an agave, or even an upended pitchfork.

Bottle trees can be any color, but blue seems to be traditionally associated with spirits. Felder Rushing relates that there is even a blue paint, "haint blue" ("haint," a southern U.S. term from the same word stem as "haunt"), to paint around windows and doorways to repel witches.

Depending upon your ethnic background, whether it is European, African or Middle Eastern, you may find a connection with your ancestors with bottle trees, but today, bottle trees are used more as an ornament than to destroy evil (just like gazing balls today). Bottle trees are especially effective when planted with delicate annual vines, such as cypress vine or black-eyed Susan vine. However, the real challenge, other than finding a suitable tree, is drinking all that wine from blue bottles ... but, ah, somebody has to do it!

*On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, and call 857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article.*

## Garden Tales



Submitted photo

Blue bottle trees were once used to capture the spirits of night demons, but today are just unusual garden ornaments.