

THE HSPR NEWSLETTER

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Our next meeting will be next Sunday, September 8, 2002 at 9:30 AM. It will be hosted by Dr. José Abreu Delíz at his country home in Cidra. A map is enclosed for your convenience. It would be a good idea if members tried car-pooling because parking space is VERY limited. Members planning to tour the farm with Dr. Abreu after the meeting should bring good walking shoes.

Dr. Sergio Tejedor will be our main speaker, but we're sure that the rest of the "troupe" that visited Thailand this summer are anxious to tell us about their wonderful experiences there. In addition, the Society would like to get impressions of the group who went to the HSI Conference.

We would like to express our thanks to Dr. German Charrón for hosting our last meeting. The tour of his property after the meeting was an incredible experience, for his collection of heliconias and ornamental gingers is one of the biggest in Puerto Rico. We also thank the members who generously provided additional food and refreshments for the table, and all of those who donated some of their valuable plants for the RAFFLE.

President's Corner

During our participation at the "Cinco Días con Nuestra Tierra" Festival at the Mayaguez UPR campus, leaflets were handed out to persons interested in heliconias and their relatives. The leaflet included general information about heliconias, information about HSPR, and, at the end of the page, a cut-out section where a person interested in joining would provide us with personal information such as name, address, telephone number, etc. Three persons replied, paid their dues, and attended the meeting last March!

Judy Nelson also distributed some of these leaflets during the Aibonito Festival. Another request for membership came on the mail with paid dues.

I suppose all of us could bring a heliconia-loving friend to one of the meetings; the fear of the group getting too big so as not to be able to hold a meeting at a private home is still far off!

Although several activities have been developed during the last couple of years to encourage interest and participation in our meetings, our membership has remained stable: some new members have arrived, some members have dropped out. Our Society remains extremely viable.

We can never insist too much in the importance of getting in touch with people that participated very actively in the past, but now, for reasons unknown, are inactive. Taking that into consideration, we will send the Bulletin this month and again in the future to some of our former members. Who knows? Maybe they have more time now. Maybe they finally found the perfect plot to plant. Maybe they tolerate us a little more...

A brief call, a little "Hello" never hurts.

Horticultural Notes

When we bought our small farm in Las Marías 15 years ago, we observed a plant with beautiful purple or maroon flowers that “came out of nowhere” during March, putting out a beautiful display because there were close to a hundred blooms together that then gave way to tall leaves with a purple vein. Those leaves would fade and eventually die, and the whole thing would disappear for several months. My cousin, Dr. Marcial Rico-Ballester, a former Professor of Horticulture at the UPR Mayaguez campus and former owner of the farm, told us the plant was known as “Venezuelan ginger”.

The plant turned out to be an aggressive grower: wherever a tiny bit of a rhizome would fall, a clump would later appear. I was always wondering if there could be a practical use for this robust plant other than for cut flowers.

I finally found out that what I had all over the place was *Curcuma zedoaria*. It has its origins in India and S.E. Asia, and it’s the source of “zedoary” or white turmeric. It is similar to turmeric in color, flavor and aroma. It also has a high starch content, and is used in India for feeding children and sick people.

I called my good friend Pablo Lugo, a serious collector of fragrant plants that lives in Hormigueros and constantly “navigates” the Internet, and he was kind enough to send us additional information on other edible relatives of the heliconias:

Some Heliconia Relatives With Edible Rhizomes:

- Calathea allouia* (lerén) from the Caribbean. Tubers cooked and used as nuts.
- Canna edulis* (achira) from the American tropics. Corms are top-like.
- Curcuma domestica* (turmeric) provides bright orange color and piquant flavor
- Curcuma zedoaria* (zedoary)
- Kaempferia galanga* (galanga). Its yellow rhizomes are used as spice
- Zingiber officinale* (common ginger). Known since ancient times in China.

Some Heliconia Relatives with Edible Seeds:

Aframomum melegueta – Seeds of this and other species of *Aframomum* are used as spice for their piquant flavor, while the fruits are chewed as stimulants. Their origin is W. Africa. *A. melegueta* is now common in Surinam and Guyana.

Alpinia galanga – Its seeds are used the same way as cardamom.

Elettaria cardamomum (cardamom) – The source of aromatic, spicy seeds used in baking and liquors. It’s widely used in Asia as a masticatory.

Renealmia occidentalis (syn. *R. aromatica*) – A tropical American native, fruits and seeds are eaten by Indians of the Amazon region.

Member's Forum:

Dr. German Charron sent us this anecdote of a former trip to Costa Rica:

"Heliconia fans will understand the meaning of this tale, because they can relate to the pleasure of a fellow collector when he or she finds a new variety."

My second visit to Costa Rica coincided with the fall of the Costa Flores empire: the biggest heliconia farm in the world had ceased to exist. The town of Guapiles, closest to the farm, became the site of hundreds of new "empresarios" making their business out of the fallen empire. Their motto was: "No problem, we'll get you what you want. Just tell us".

I was hesitant, doubting their words, because I had already been taken on my first trip to the country by big and small traders selling flowers. I expressed my doubts to the guy, and he said, "I understand. But I'm a serious trader. I have a wife and children. Tell me what you want." So I told him. "Bella, reticulata and umbrophila? Those are rare numbers to find, but I'll get them for you for a mere hundred dollars."

The price sounded perfect. We agreed, I got the rhizomes, and, on my return to the Island (PR), I called my good friend Ray Jerome to tell him the news. He was very happy, and reminded me they were a "first" in Puerto Rico, so I had to take very good care of those rhizomes.

A year later, my three beautiful, rare and expensive heliconias flowered. One was a very handsome Barbados Flat, and the other two, some very healthy Lobster Claw I.

Greed got me for the second time. It seems that some of us never learn!

Announcements

The minutes of our last meeting were due to be printed in this newsletter, but it was not possible this time. We expect them to be published from now on. We are very sorry for this inconvenience.

Those members who may have forgotten to pay their dues to the Society, kindly contact our Treasurer, Mary Strow. Remember dues are paid on the first meeting of the year, usually in March.

Remember that all members can sell plants at the meetings, provided that they also donate plants for the Raffle. Anyone interested in being in charge of selling the Raffle tickets? Please let us know.

We are counting on our Vice-President, Dr. Bryan Brunner, to share with us his experiences during his recent visit to Hawaii. We're sure he has a lot to talk about.

Please remember that the Society is going through an organizational phase. Some members of the Board have not been elected yet, and this is a priority for our next meeting. Those willing to work please come forward. We have a lot to do.

Bonnie K.: our hearts are with you. We hope you'll be well soon. We love you.