



Chelsea Flower Show, May 2005

By John Criswick, Contributor

I'd like to give members an account of my experiences as a member of the Grenada team at the 2005 Chelsea Flower Show. It is a major event in the British calendar and has been held for a great many years on the grounds of the Chelsea Royal Hospital on the banks of the river Thames in south west London. The hospital building is extremely beautiful, being built by Sir Christopher Wren in 1742. He is also the architect of St. Paul's Cathedral in the city of London. It's not a hospital as such but a home for aged war veterans. They wear a uniform dating from the 1600s, and the dress version is bright red. These old soldiers are often to be seen mingling with the crowds at the flower show.

We flew up over 80 boxes of cut heliconias, gingers, costus, anthuriums, tapeinochilos, foliage, etc. from Grenada and the first job immediately on arrival, having tried to sleep on the plane overnight, was to unpack the boxes and get the flowers and foliage into containers of water. It was extremely cold to us from Grenada, with a maximum daytime temperature of 17 C (63 F), dropping to 10 C (50 F) or lower at night. We had to boil water with an electric urn to add to the water from the tap. Generally speaking the cut foliage of zingiberaceous plants is not easy to maintain in good

condition. Alpinias tend to roll up. Musas to better but are less useful in arranging. Palms, ferns, philodendrons, dracaenas and polycias are all excellent. What amazed us as well as the public was the fact that all this regrowth of plants and flowers has occurred in the 8 months since Hurricane Ivan.

Our team leader, Suzanne Gaywood, is a Grenadian living in England and is a very talented flower arranger and has great organizational ability. Also she has gathered around her in Essex



Packing flowers and foliage in Grenada for shipment to the Chelsea Flower Show.

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Dates to Remember

- HSPR Meeting, 10:00 am, Sunday, September 11, 2005. Farm of Dr. José Abreu, Carr. 171, Km. 0.9, Bo. Sud, Cidra, PR.

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village a vital team, including her husband, which voluntarily carries out the work of staging props (this year a model of a ruined church) and transporting and also dismantling of staging at the end of the show, so it is an Anglo-Grenadian effort.

We worked all through Saturday and Sunday and managed to complete the display by Sunday night. The next morning is Press Day, when journalists and TV crews and celebrities take in the show. Monday evening the judges pass around after we have gone to our rented apartment and we don't know if we have received an award, or what category of award, until first thing Tuesday morning. It is not a competition, so there can be many gold medals, but the judges are sparing with them. Suzanne gets up very early and arrives about 7 am to see what we have got. There are four awards, bronze, silver, silver gilt and gold. Only when we are approaching our display do we get to see if the judges have left a card on it, and only when you get close enough to see the colour of the embossed medallion in the centre of the card do you know what standard you have reached. Ours was gold! Just like last year and the three years before that. Suzanne gets so tense at this time that when she knows we've won gold, she bursts into tears! And this time the BBC cameraman was there to catch her and her smiling, emotionally charged face with glistening tears and was sent all over the nation that day and for days after.

Talking about tears, our display was built around the theme, Paradise Reclaimed, meaning that after the terrible destruction of Grenada on September 7th, 2004, Grenada is coming back, symbolized by the exuberant flora around the ruined church. One visitor was moved to tears.

What made Chelsea 2005 so special for me was the visit, on Wednesday, of our celebrated son of the soil, Private Johnson Beharry, V.C., particularly because it had been my idea that we should invite him. Also, we are naming a new cultivar of heliconia for him. He is a 25 year old Grenadian who was recently awarded the Victoria Cross for outstanding bravery in the Iraq War in May last year. In two separate incidents, in ambushes and under heavy enemy fire, he saved the lives of many fellow soldiers and officers, pulling them out of burning armoured cars, driving them to safety while a bullet lodged just inside his helmet and his vision was obscured by blood, eventually collapsing from sheer ex-

haustion. The second time he received a more serious injury when a rocket-propelled grenade exploded six inches from his head, just outside the hatch. He is still receiving treatment for his injuries, and is likely to be in pain for the rest of his life.

The Victoria Cross is Britain's highest military award and has not been awarded to a living soldier since 1965. Beharry is the youngest man to ever receive it. What chokes me is that when Beharry went to Buckingham Palace the other day to receive his award from the Queen, a general was also there to receive another award. The general told the press that he was completely overshadowed by the presence of Beharry, and that is just as it should be. Well, we in Grenada are very, very proud of him.

We had invited him on Monday and were disappointed that he had to have medical treatment on that day. He came instead on Wednesday with a military gentleman



Private Johnson Beharry V.C. sitting among Grenada grown flowers at the Grenada exhibit of the Chelsea Flower Show. The red flowers to his left are Heliconia 'Johnson Beharry V.C.'

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in civilian clothes who escorted him, to protect him from the attentions of the press. Johnson was very charming and modest and soon there was a big photo shoot going on from a battery of cameras. I showed him the label of the heliconia we are naming for him, and he read, *Heliconia* 'Johnson Beharry'. Then he said, "But you didn't put the V.C." I then explained that we had originally intended to name it *Heliconia* 'Private Johnson Beharry V.C.' but that I had been advised by the registrar of the Heliconia Society International to keep the name short, otherwise there was a risk of the flower being called by some other, easier name. However, in view of Johnson's concern I felt that we should add the "V.C." because the important thing in naming this flower for him is that he should be pleased. His wishes come first in this matter.

It is only the second heliconia to be officially named through the new registry of HSI. In fact it is a mutation or "sport" of a heliconia known as 'Alan Carle' or 'Golden Opal', which is a hybrid between *H. psittacorum* and *H. spathocircinata*, and occurred on the Grenada farm of team member Denis Noel O.B.E. It is so fortunate that Denis had this RED flower waiting to be named. It happened to be entirely appropriate and is an example of how things fell into place for us. Should any members be interested in purchasing rhizomes in quantity of *Heliconia* 'Johnson Beharry V.C.' (Beharry for short), they may contact Denis Noel at denis-noel@caribsurf.com. Being a small, lightweight heliconia and also red, the number one colour in the cut flower industry, it has great commercial potential.

Everyone who saw him remarked how charming and modest Johnson was. We helped him up to the stand so that he might sit on the steps of the ruined church we had built (symbolizing damage to Grenada by Hurricane Ivan) and he had to place his hand on the rather sharp nutmeg shells strewn on the boards of the display. He said, "I'm accustomed to this." In fact Johnson comes from a little village in the north of Grenada called Diego Piece, situated in real nutmeg growing country. In Grenada we spread nutmeg shells on paths, like gravel, or landscapers use it like pine bark chips, as mulch. Holding the single specimen of the heliconia which we had presented to him, he said, "This is mine", and took his leave of us.

The next morning a photo of him, holding his heliconia,



Private Johnson Beharry V.C. proudly holds the flower that was named for him.

appeared in Britain's prestigious The Times newspaper. There are many generals and marshals who have had flowers named for them, but I dare to think that never has a private soldier had one named for him.

Saturday, the last day of the show arrived, and at 4 pm the bell rang, which was the signal for the selling off of exhibited items to begin. We tore down our carefully constructed display and sold what we could to raise funds. This is a hectic hour or so, after which everything, but everything had to be thrown away or taken away, leaving the bare boards of the square platform with its green baize surround exactly as we found it. By 11 pm we were able to leave. There was no dinner for us that night, but we were sustained by the knowledge that everything had gone so well, in fact, it seemed, had magically fallen into place.

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*Promoting Zingiberales in
Puerto Rico since 1996.*



The Heliconia Society of Puerto Rico, Inc. was founded in 1996. The objectives of the society are to stimulate and promote the enjoyment and understanding of Heliconia and related plants of the order Zingiberales through education, research and communication, and to interact with the Heliconia Society International and other institutions which share similar interests, purposes or objectives.

President's Corner

For last month's meeting we were very honored to be visited by José Abalo, world authority from Venezuela on heliconias, and his wife María Luisa. José presented us with an hour lecture/slide presentation of heliconias of the world. Many of his photos were fantastic and beautiful and his commentary was most educational. This was the first lecture of what we hope HSPR will be able to sponsor in the future as an ongoing "Meet the Experts" lecture series for our members and the public (depending on available funds that we can generate for the guests' airfare).

José's lecture was well attended by members of our society, but there were few guests from the general public. Enilda did a great job in getting press releases to the newspapers, radio and television stations, but as far as we can tell, only one newspaper issued the press release. In the future, we will have to establish close relationships with the media personnel responsible for using press releases and see if we can not get much better notification of our upcoming lectures.

After José's lecture, our members enjoyed a wonderful luncheon prepared and served by Amelia Villanueva and other women of our Society. We are very grateful to all of them for their help. While eating lunch, our members were able to get to meet both José and María Luisa Abalo and to discuss heliconias with them. A great time was had by everyone. We also deeply appreciate the beautiful bouquets of heliconias and gingers that were supplied by several members of our society. All of these flower arrangements were magnificent.

Judy Nelson and Sergio Tejedor had wonderful sales displays that everyone enjoyed and from which the members were able to increase their collections. José and María Luisa were able to visit the collections of Sergio and Nancy Tejedor, Héctor Méndez Caratini, Bryan and Yarisa Brunner, and Ray and Migdalia Jerome. The Abalos were extremely impressed with

all these collections and José gave us some very educational expert advice and opinions about many of our plants. We're hoping that our next experts may be Carla Black and Angel Rodríguez from Panama.

Our September 11th meeting will be held at the farm of Dr. José Abreu in Cidra, Puerto Rico. Our speaker for this meeting will be Susan Brooks. She will be speaking on "Collecting Heliconias in the Wild". We will resume having the raffle and plant sales. Please check with Mary Strow at the meeting to see if you owe any dues. We hope that everyone will be able to attend this meeting and have another great time together.

Best Regards,
Ray Jerome

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