The Palm Beach Tropical Flower & Garden Show

February 19, 20, 21 & 22  10 am to 6 pm

The world's largest outdoor tropical flower show!

8 acre garden festival in downtown West Palm Beach featuring rare plants, lectures and demonstrations, design pavilion, children's activities, concerts, outdoor dining, garden marketplace, horticultural competition.

Info: 561.655.5522   www.palmbeachflowershow.org
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A Gift to the Garden: The legacy of José Celestino Mutis

The 18th century illustration of the Colombian palm Aphilanes sp., published in 1985 as Plate 1 in J.C. Mutis Flora de la Real Expedición Botánica del Nuevo Reino de Granada Tomo 5(1)

The 17th and 18th centuries were the Golden Age of natural history explorations. During this time, the major European powers developed scientific expeditions to study the botany, zoology, and geology of their overseas colonies. Spain, which had many colonies at this time, officially sponsored seven scientific expeditions between 1754 and 1808. Expeditions were sent to Venezuela, Peru, Colombia, the Philippines, the Pacific Ocean, Mexico, and the West Indies. One of the most notable expeditions, organized by José Celestino Mutis, was carried out during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. On this expedition, the botanical and zoological richness of northern South America in Colombia, known then as the Virreinato de Nueva Granada, was revealed.

Celestino Mutis was born in Andalucía in the city of Cadiz in 1732. He studied medicine in Seville and Cadiz; in 1760 he traveled to Colombia, where he lived until his death in 1808. Soon after his arrival, he developed a passion for the natural history of Colombia. He contacted the Spanish king on several occasions for support in organizing a scientific expedition to explore the natural history of the New World. It was not until 1783, after 20 years, that the first Bourbon King of Spain, Carlos III, approved the expedition.

Between 1783 and 1808, Mutis tirelessly led an extraordinary endeavor to collect and illustrate the plants of Colombia. To accomplish this huge project, he recruited and trained several illustrators and botanists, mostly from Colombia. After his death, this work was carried on by one of his most important students, Francisco José Caldas, who was killed in 1810 during the wars of independence between the South American colonies and the Kingdom of Spain.

In 1816, the King of Spain ordered all the descriptions, herbarium sheets, and illustrations of the Expedición Botánica de Nueva Granada to be shipped to Spain. They are currently deposited at the Royal Botanic Garden of Madrid. In three decades, this expedition produced more than 6,000 illustrations and 24,000 herbarium specimens. At one time, twenty illustrators worked simultaneously on these extraordinary illustrations.

Mutis was highly regarded by his contemporary botanists; the great Linnaeus considered him as the most important botanist of the New World and called him "Phytologist Americanorum Primus." Linnaeus himself received many plants from Mutis. Among them was a strange climbing daisy with red flowers. Later Linnaeus' son dedicated this plant to Mutis under the genus name of Mutisia. Recent evolutionary studies have demonstrated that this is one of the most primitive genera of the plant family of daisies. Humboldt and Bonpland were hosted by Mutis during two months in 1801. Humboldt referred to Mutis with admiration in his two famous books Plantas Equinocciales y Biographie Universelle.

In 1929, the collections of Mutis in Madrid were rediscovered by the American botanist Ellsworth Paine Killip, leading to a resurgence of interest in Mutis' work. But it was not until the end of the Spanish Civil War and World War II that the governments of Spain and Colombia joined forces to publish the botanical descriptions and illustrations of the Expedición Botánica. The first volume of this work was published in 1953; at present 23 volumes with more than 500 illustrations and scientific descriptions have been published.

The legacy of Mutis is extraordinary. His work went beyond the organization and leadership of one of the most important European scientific expeditions made in the New World: he directed a generation of Latin American botanists and scientists, and the establishment of the first Latin American scientific institute. Mutis represents a superb example and reference for botanists. His perseverance, work ethics and love for the country that adopted him are examples for many of us who often need to carry out our research with limited resources.

Javier Francisco-Ortega,
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Assistant Professor, Biological Sciences, Florida International University

Fifteen volumes of Mutis’ Flora were donated to the Garden by the Centro Cultural Español of Miami. (Above, l-r) Dr. Mike Maunder, Kiki Mutis, Guillermo Basso (Director, Centro Cultural Español), and Dr. Javier Francisco-Ortega. Ms. Mutis is a direct descendant of J.C. Mutis and continues his scientific tradition.

She received her BS in Environmental Studies at Florida International University and has done botanical research at Fairchild. The Centro Cultural Español (www.ccepmiami.org) is a non-profit organization supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of Spain.