

The Colors of the Tropical Flowering Garden

Text and photos by Jason Lopez, Manager, Rainforest and Horticultural Exhibits



Ceiba pentandra on the lawn at the Visitor Center.



Hamelia axillaris

Sure, you could say that all plants are developed by nature, but you would be amazed how much control a nurseryman has with some time and space.

At first glance, the Tropical Flower Garden at Fairchild might just look like a colorful place with textures and scents made to please its visitors. While this is true, it is not the whole truth. Mixed in among the plants are wild-collected plants from all over the world, developed by nature herself. Some are plants that botanists and horticulturists suffer dislocated shoulders and poison ivy rashes to find. Sure, you could say that all plants are developed by nature, but you would be amazed how much control a nurseryman has with some time and space. Wild-collected plants serve as a window to what is actually growing in the world's natural areas.



Brunfelsia densifolia

A few feet away grows *Brunfelsia densifolia*. As the name suggests, the foliage is very dense on this upright shrub. At first glance they appear to be *Podocarpus*, commonly used as screening or a hedge, but they certainly are not. There are times throughout the year when *B. densifolia* is covered in fragrant yellow flowers and whose scent can be enjoyed even from the tram path. This awesome plant is known from one area in Puerto Rico and is listed as endangered due to habitat destruction for agriculture. Originally collected for the garden by Dr. Timothy Plowman in the early 1970s, the bulk of the collection was entrusted to us by the Center for Plant Conservation in the 1980s.

In Plot 50, you will find *Cubanola daphnoides*, a wonderful plant endemic to Cuba that grows in the sub-montane forests of the Holguin Province. Glossy leaves shimmer in the sunlight and the large, creamy-white pendant flowers hang in abundance. Most people think that they are looking at Angel's Trumpet Trees from the tomato family which are in Plot 50 as well, but they are actually enjoying one of the many coffee relatives.

A few feet away grows *Brunfelsia densifolia*. As the name suggests, the foliage is very dense on this upright shrub. At first glance they

Great plants from the 2006 Fairchild Latham Expedition to Cockpit Country, Jamaica, led by our own Dr. Lauren Raz, have already made it into the garden. On the lawn southwest of the Visitor Center sits *Ceiba pentandra*, the famous Kapok Tree. Collecting *Ceiba* can be difficult due to its enormous stature, but we found a younger one growing along a path that was willing to provide some propagules. *Hamelia axillaris* and the Jamaican endemic *Tournefortea staminea*, both new introductions to the garden, sit next to each other in Plot 43. I cannot tell you how excited I was during both of these finds. *H. axillaris* has the reddish tones and leaf shape of our native Firebush, and the yellow flowers of the Bahama Firebush, only smaller. *Tournefortea staminea* is typically found growing in thickets and woodland margins on limestone cliffs. We collected our cuttings from White Rock Hill, a classic collecting locality made up of slippery clay and jagged karst limestone. As this plant matures, its deeply fissured bark and highly fragrant inflorescences become wondrous.

As the wave of color that is the Tropical Flower Garden expands, keep an eye out for things you do not recognize. They could be from local nursery stock or they could be a *Barringtonia* collected in Malaysia by Dr. Jack Fisher or even an *Antidesma* collected in Asia by Dr. David Fairchild himself. 