

BROMELIANA

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COLUMBIA - 2014

by Chris Larson

(This article was excerpted and condensed from the October-November 2015 issue of the Newsletter of the Bromeliad Society of Victoria, based in Sydney, Australia. When I sat down to start writing this February issue, the early morning temperature was 10 ° F. and the wind chill factor was well below zero. I thought it would be warming to take you on a brief trip to Columbia where bromeliads grow in heat and humidity. Most of the photos below were taken by Chris who is the former President of the Victoria Bromeliad Society; some may have been taken by Michael Ferenczi or Peter Tristram. Editor)

In the past few years I've had a few good proposals to venture over to Central or South America where I could look at plants in the wild again - the last time was in 1998. With the kids growing older I could see the chances improve to go on a plant mission again, this time to Columbia with Peter Tristram from Repton (*a knowledgeable and experienced collector - Ed*) and Michael Ferenczi from Sydney. Though Columbia has always been of interest, it is a bit different to my usual travels as I've always preferred xeric (drier) areas, whereas Colombia has a greater number of mesic (wetter) areas.

After talking for a few years to Bruce Dunstan about his travels in Columbia, we decided to contact the driver/guide that he used on many of his trips. This made it easy, as he knew where many of the plants we wanted to see were. He also would provide the vehicle, and he knew which areas were safer. Unfortunately, 10 days before we were to leave, he had a heart attack, and 3 days before we got there he had successful major heart surgery.

Our problems were less severe, but we had to

sort out a major problem: we had no vehicle organized and not much of a plan - and our departure was only a week away.

We had planned to visit Bromelias de Columbia, the nursery of Franz Gruber and his children, so we contacted Franz to help work out a trip plan and we arranged for a driver/guide, Aldo, and a guide, Sergio who knew about many of the plants of these areas though they were not bromeliad specialists. So the three of us flew into Bogota, Columbia to meet the driver.

After a good night's sleep we went into the city to organize phone cards, a nightmare that took a few days before we got them to work. We also got to walk around the beautiful old part of Bogota and go through the Gold Museum, one of the most impressive museums I've ever visited.

We had our plan to visit the Bromelias de Columbia nursery and we had Aldo to drive us, so we went off to the town of Fusagasuga (hereinafter called Fusa), a little over an hour from Bogota, and met with our other guide, Sergio. Our hotel on the first night



Chris Larson, Michael Ferenczi and Peter Tristram at entrance to nursery

THERE WILL BE NO MEETING IN FEBRUARY



Guzmania conifera

was one of the worst hotels I have ever stayed in. It was clean, but it was on a major road with the sound of the trucks roaring past all night. The breakfast repeated on me for the next few days causing me much stomach discomfort. Sergio and Franz came by at breakfast to take us to the nursery,

which we expected would contain collectors' plants, European tissue culture plants and popular plants in the commercial trade.

However, we found a great range of plants from around the world. The nursery was far ahead of its time in recycling the water it used. It was very clean and the plants were impressively healthy. The multitude of plants was amazing. They had even selected superior clones of *Guzmania conifera* with branched inflorescences and had vegetatively propagated these. (See photo above.)



Neoregelia 'Perfection' is a sport of Neo. 'Fosperior' with mostly stable variegation. It was named and produced by Bert Foster. N. 'Fosperior' was made and registered by Mulford Foster in 1978. Its parentage is not known. The inset photo is by Frank Sherman, from the BCR. Editor

Neoregelia 'Fosperior Perfection'. A great hybrid which was once reasonably common in Melbourne 20-30 years ago. It was great to see them here again – though so much larger than I remember

which is a result of the tropical climate.



Tillandsia cacticola

Tillandsia cacticola is one of the most spectacular and easy tillandsias to grow. Franz had a number of forms, small, medium and large, and some with no stem and some semi-caulescent. He even had one with white bracts. Of course *T. cacticola* comes from Peru, but it grows perfectly in the nursery which is only an hour away from Bogota, at an elevation of 1700 meters (a little more than a mile up). They use *T.cacticola*, along with *T.straminea* and others, in the cut flower market.

(Note that the yellow petals of the flowers have a purple tinged apex. They are similar to the flower petals of *Tillandsia straminea* shown in the insets on page 3. But the flowers of *T. cacticola* are not fragrant, whereas the flowers of *T. straminea* are highly perfumed. Editor)



Tillandsia duratii seedlings - see note on p. 4



Vriesea ospinae var. *gruberi* cultivar by Franz Gruber

Vriesea ospinae var *gruberi* with a difference. Franz had cultivated a few different clones of this plant and this was my favourite. Only 12” (30 cm) across with very nice markings, it was a stunner. Franz was also very keen to get his hands on the Australian clones such as *Vriesea* ‘Tiger Tim’ and *V.* ‘Smudge Grub’. (There are clones of *V.* ‘Tiger Tim’ that are similar to this plant. Editor)



Aechmea chantinii cultivar

Aechmea chantinii. One of the several amazing forms of *A. chantinii* grown at the nursery. This one had lovely foliage, with less defined markings than some of the others. I’d love one of each – but it is of no use as they would not look like this here in Australia anyway. It is better to put the picture on my wall and leave the *chantinii* to those living in the tropics.



Tillandsia straminea - the left inset is its flower
The right inset is the flower of *T. cacticola*

Tillandsia straminea with a difference. This species is highly variable. This form is a nice addition to my collection; the deep color of the bracts is quite unusual.



Tillandsia elongata and *T. dyeriana* at the La Bromelia

We did a couple of short trips from Franz’s place; on to the mountains above the tree line. These were bleak landscapes with beautiful native species, including a few *Puyas*. I was suffering badly from the stomach bug I had picked at the hotel in Fusa on the second morning. Franz thought it was his driving and I couldn’t convince him otherwise - but it didn’t slow him down.

We also went on a quick trip to a lower altitude...where we spotted a large, unknown *Aechmea* sp.



Tillandsia flexuosa - inset photo by HP

We also found our first *T. flexuosa* plants which was prevalent growing near *T. elongata* under 1,200 meters. We would see these 2 species regularly over the following three weeks, but at this time the excitement of even the most common Colombian bromeliads was still fresh. The unusual twisting shape and silver stripes with a nice spike has made *T. flexuosa* a much sought after plant. It is difficult to grow in southern (Australian) climes as it needs to be heated in the winter. (It grows well in an apartment. Ed)



Tillandsia fendleri

Tillandsia fendleri was seen at medium altitudes throughout our travels. Unfortunately, this species can only be propagated from seed or from

adventitious pups (grassy pups similar to those found on Alcantareas) as they seem to die after flowering without producing pups.

(Chris Larson indicated that he would report later on the rest of his travels in Columbia, and we look forward to reading about them. Editor) □

Note for Seedlings (see page 2)

(There are many hundreds of seedlings of *Tillandsia duratii* which is in short supply. If only we could get many large growers and, especially, tissue culturists to create hundreds of seedlings or tissue cultures of many broms we used to grow and which are now no longer available - such as *Tillandsia atroviridipetala*, *T. heubergeri*, *T. kautzkyi*, *T. reclinata*, *T. sprengliana* to name just a few. Also, there are many beautiful plants that are extremely difficult to grow out of habitat, such as *T. biflora*, many *Lindmanias*, *Navias* and *Racinaeas*. It would be of great benefit to horticultural science and to brom growers if these plants could be tissue cultured in habitat and then produced and selected out by competent nurserymen to adapt to our conditions. Editor)

NEWS and NOTES

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