

BROMELIAD SOCIETY OF

SAN FRANCISCO

AUGUST 2014



Meeting Specifics

When: Thursday, August 21

Time: 6:30 PM

Where: Conservatory of Flowers
Golden Gate Park
100 John F. Kennedy Drive
San Francisco



Visit to the Conservatory of Flowers

This month, we will not have a regular monthly meeting. Instead, we will be visiting the Conservatory of Flowers in Golden Gate Park. We will be able to visit the plants after the building is closed to the public. If you have never been to this conservatory, you are in for a treat. Each of the rooms are temperature-controlled for the plants in that room - and the plants are lush and happy! **Tom Koerber**, one of our members spends a great deal of time volunteering to maintain the bromeliads. One of the rooms is always devoted to a theme for specific types of plants. The current exhibit is devoted to carnivorous plants, so be careful. Our host for the tour will be **Mario Vega** who curates the bromeliad collection.

We will not be having a show-and-tell of bromeliads or a plant raffle as we usually do. At the end of the tour, we will gather for refreshments and any business announcements.

Cid Young and Dan Arcos signed up for refreshments this month. Any additional refreshments will be appreciated. We may need drinks if it is hot in the city.

Happy folks at our first stop; *Alcantarea imperialis* flowering at our second stop; beautiful *Tillandsia tectorums* at our third stop. (All photos are courtesy of Peter Wan)



July Meeting

A big thanks goes out to each person who opened their homes and gardens to us!

Each year our society has a garden tour to members' gardens. This year we visited three gardens in Marin County. Our first stop was to the garden of **Michelle Derviss**. Her garden was immaculate and with several spent bromeliad flowers as well as some bromeliads coming into flower. Michelle said that 40% of her backyard plants were lost during the winter. You

would not know it. The backyard was filled with plants of all kinds as well as artsy props.

Our second stop was at the hillside garden of **Tom Henthorne** - with an emphasis on "hill". It was quite a climb to his property with lots of switchbacks, but the view from his property is magnificent. Your editor did not traverse the

grounds that well but the plant material was diverse and beautiful - with many indoor bromeliads and a huge *Alcantarea imperialis* coming into flower outside.

Our last stop was to the home of the late Don Worth who has a noted palm collection.

Our members provided fantastic food for our potluck lunch!

This home is also in the hills so there was another climb to see the beautiful plants. As soon as we got there, the members were hungry and the plant viewing took a back seat to the food. Even though we did not have access to kitchen facilities, the spread our members provided was

delicious. The palm collection is amazing and very large and confined to a small space. There was also a shade house on the grounds that contained many beautiful succulents and bromeliads. The group of *Tillandsia tectorums* was very healthy and beautiful.



This event would not have happened without the planning from Dan Arcos and the cooperation of the individuals who hosted the tour. Thanks to you all!

Puya raimondii in Flower



Photos are courtesy of the Berkeley Botanical Garden.

At the Berkeley Botanical Garden a very uncommon event is now in process. *Puya raimondii*, which is the largest bromeliad species in the world, is now in full flower. The common name for this plant is “Queen of the Andes.” The flower stalk can be up to 30 feet and have over ten thousand flowers and set 8-12 million seeds. This plant is native to higher elevations in Bolivia and Peru and usually does not flower until the plant is approximately 80-100 years old. It is monocarpic (does not produce offsets) and rarely flowers outside of habitat.

We are fortunate that we live in an area where this species has flowered before. In 1986 at the Berkeley Botanical Garden a plant flowered and this unusual event deservedly caused lots of media attention and publicity. Another plant flowered at the San Francisco Botanical Garden in 2006 (that plant fell over and flowered along the ground). The Berkeley plants were 24 and 28 years old when they flowered and no one knows why they are flowering at such an early age.

There aren't many populations of the Queen of the Andes in the wild. Most of them have many thousands of plants, but their genetic diversity is low. They may be unable to adapt to changes in climate. Human impacts to the populations include repeated fires to

generate or maintain pasture for livestock forage. Plants are also used for fuel and furniture. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (ICUN) categorizes this species as endangered.

The original collector of the seed for this species has written a letter about the process that is found on the Berkeley website (botanicalgarden.berkeley.edu/whatsnew/Puya2014/). An excerpt is provided below:

“Neither Jim nor I had seen this *Puya* and we were thrilled to be able to make the short excursion across the Altiplano from La Paz to Comanche to see it in the wild. We were not thinking about collecting and when we did see the plants in flower and fruit we succumbed to the temptation to try to make several herbarium specimens. Lacking ladders or pole pruners we managed to dislodge parts of an infructescence by throwing rocks at the fruiting stalk. We all joined in and I do not remember now who had the best arm. The herbarium specimens were numbered in Jim's series and deposited in herbaria in La Paz, the Bronx, and Washington, DC, at least. ...I am glad you were able to coax *Puya raimondii* into flowering and am pleased your visitors will be able to marvel at this plant, too...

[Article is based on Berkeley Botanical Garden website information]

Summer Gardening Fair

It is an annual tradition for the San Francisco plant societies and related societies to get together in Golden Gate Park on a Saturday in August to share ideas about plants, mushrooms, bees, etc. with the public. This year, local members of our society plus our president participated on 2 August from 10 AM to 3 PM. The weather is usually extremely cold - do not know how it was this year. We had some plants left over from our June sale and many members of the public went home with new bromeliads.

Auburn man's bromeliads are out of this world

On 26 July, the Sacramento Bee published an article about Chet Blackburn, who is active in bromeliads and most other plants in the Sacramento area. Chet has been an officer and past editor of the Bromeliad Society International journal.

Chet Blackburn saw his first bromeliad almost 50 years ago in a tropical Guatemala rain forest. Driving on a narrow mountain road, he was overwhelmed by the rainbow of colorful foliage that seemed to be everywhere - especially overhead.

"I'd never seen anything else like them," he recalled of the exotic bromeliads. "I decided then and there I had to have some."

Now Blackburn has one of the largest bromeliad collections in the West.

"I topped out with more than 1,500 varieties," he said. "I've tried to cut back."

Greenhouses at his Auburn home are packed to the rafters with these unusual, often hanging plants.

"Most of them are epiphytes," he said. "They grow in trees. They get all their water and nutrients up there. In fact, they have their own little ecosystem inside the plant."

This weekend, Blackburn will share his expansive knowledge of bromeliads and other curious plants at

the 44th annual Sacramento Bromeliad and Carnivorous Plant Society Show and Sale at the Shepard Garden and Arts Center in [McKinley Park](#).

As he's done for 10 years, Blackburn will create a gigantic display of showy bromeliads in flower. In neon shades of pink, purple, blue and orange, the flowers make these unusual plants look like they came from some alien planet, not an Auburn greenhouse. The striped and variegated foliage is just as colorful as the flowers.

"These aren't your Home Depot bromeliads," Blackburn joked. "The 'vase plants' you typically see in stores are actually hybrids. They're pretty easy to grow."

His annual display is a great way to get people talking, and thinking, about these showy plants. Blackburn even has a species of bromeliad named for him: *Vriesea blackburniana*. "It's native to a particularly environmentally sensitive area of Brazil," he said. "I joke that it's a race to see which one of us will be extinct first."

At 81, Blackburn is recognized by plant people throughout the area for his extreme depth of botanical knowledge as well as his devotion to growing things. He's finishing his second book, a guide to native shrubs and trees. His first, "Wildflowers of Nevada and Placer Counties" (California Native Plant Society), is a go-to guide for native plant lovers.

"Chet has more plant knowledge than anyone I've ever known," said fellow bromeliad society member Eric Trygg. "It's phenomenal. He can look at a plant 10 feet away, any plant, and tell you what it is. He's very, very generous with his time, especially with young people just beginning to learn about plants.

"And it's not just bromeliads," Trygg added, "but all sorts of plants. Chet has hundreds of rarities in his collection, plants you won't find anywhere else."

A plant collector since high school in Ohio, Blackburn keeps meticulous records. A thick green binder holds maps of his 8-acre garden and greenhouses, detailing the location of every plant plus updates on its well-being.

"He's very methodical - and brilliant," Trygg said.

Said Blackburn, "My garden is my own little arboretum, so I treat it as such. This way, I can keep track."

At the site of a historic gold mine, his garden sprawls over the banks of Auburn's North Ravine at about 1,000 feet elevation. The home of abundant wildlife as well as plants, the garden has evolved over 42 years to feature two large ponds, a grove of redwoods and a black bamboo

forest, as well as many native oaks.

“I’m a collector, and I love plants,” Blackburn said. “Recently, my focus has been on native plants and trying to protect those rare species.”

But he also mixes in lots of surprises, such as favorite trees from his native Ohio.

“I’m blessed with several micro-climates,” he said, “so I can grow things that aren’t supposed to grow here.”

Jean Blackburn, his wife, helps keep up this massive foothills garden.

“I love being outdoors,” she said. “He’s planted just about every plant out there. When we moved here, there was nothing. This is all Chet.”

Among all his many plants, the bromeliads rank among his favorites.

“Why grow bromeliads? Perhaps the main reason people are drawn to them is color,” Blackburn said. “No other plant family displays such a wide variety of colors and uses them in such a wide variety of ways. Interior landscapers love them both for their bright, long-lasting color and their low-maintenance requirements.”

Interior designers also love to use them, he added. “They withstand low [light conditions](#) reasonably well, they remain in color for astonishingly long periods of time, and they require little maintenance. They have adapted to a variety of habitats in nature, and they are adaptable plants in cultivation.”

The plant’s secret to survival is its center “cup.” The tightly whorled leaves form their own little reservoir to hold accumulated rainwater or other moisture.

Blackburn pointed to a bright red bromeliad. “You can water this *Vriesea*, making sure it has water in the cup, and then go off on a six-week cruise and not worry about it,” he said. “Try that with your African violet.”

Hummingbirds that are attracted to the red and other bright colors pollinate most bromeliads. That coloring also attracts people. The more common varieties, such as the *Vriesea*, are quite at home indoors.

“They’re among the best houseplants,” Blackburn said. “Give them excellent drainage and good light; you can hardly go wrong.”

Blackburn also has hundreds of carnivorous plants. Dozens of Venus flytraps keep the bug count down in his hot and humid greenhouse devoted to these oddities. Pitcher plants stretch out their hairy throats, hoping for an errant mosquito or other critter. Many of these plants also will be in this weekend’s show.

“Kids are just fascinated by them,” Blackburn said. “The flytraps are very interesting. The trigger is in those hairs. If a fly touches any two hairs or the same one twice, the clamshell snaps shut and that’s that.”

With nine grandchildren, Blackburn loves to get kids excited about plants. With a mischievous twinkle in his eye, he shares the secret to his most unusual kid-friendly plant: his “doughnut tree.”

“Our first grandchild planted it almost 25 years ago,” he said.

The “seed” actually was a Cheerio. With granddad’s help, the preschooler carefully planted it outside the sunroom window, so the doughnut tree’s progress could be easily seen. When that child visited again at Easter, Blackburn decorated a large Chinese pistache tree near the planting spot with more than a dozen doughnuts. And that delicious harvest turned into an annual family tradition.

“Now, we have doughnut harvests every spring,” he said. “If it’s a cold winter, they’re all frosted doughnuts. But I’d have to say, that doughnut tree is the rarest plant in my collection.”



The BSSF is a non-profit educational organization promoting the study and cultivation of bromeliads. The BSSF meets monthly on the 3rd Thursday at 7:30 PM in the Recreation Room of the San Francisco County Fair Building, 9th Avenue at Lincoln Way, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. Meetings feature educational lectures and displays of plants. Go to sfbromeliad.org for information about our meetings.

The BSSF publishes a monthly newsletter that comes with the membership. Annual dues are single (\$15), dual (\$20). To join the BSSF, mail your name(s), address, telephone number, e-mail address, and check payable to the BSSF to: Harold Charns, BSSF Treasurer, 255 States Street, San Francisco, CA 94114-1405.

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BROMELIAD SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL

The Bromeliad Society International publishes the Journal bimonthly at Orlando, Florida. Subscription price (in U.S. \$) is included in the 12-month membership dues. Please address all membership and subscription correspondence to Membership Secretary Annette Dominiquez, 8117 Shenandoah Dr., Austin, TX 78753-5734, U.S.A. or go to www.bsi.org.

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