

BROMELIAD SOCIETY OF

SAN FRANCISCO

SEPTEMBER 2014



Meeting Specifics

When: Thursday, September 18

Time: 07:30 PM

Recreation Room

Where: San Francisco County Fair
Building
9th Avenue at Lincoln Way
San Francisco

Kelly will be bringing bromeliads and related plants for sale. He always brings nice plants, so bring your checkbook.



Tillandsia Encounters in Mexico

This month, **Kelly Griffin** will give us a slide show on some of the tillandsias that he has found on his many trips to Mexico. Kelly is an inveterate traveler and has explored plants from all over the world. His day job is the plant research and development manager for Altman Plants, the country's largest producer of succulents. He also co-owns Xeric Growers, a wholesale and mail order succulent nursery near San Diego. Some of us know him for the magnificent Aloe and Agave hybrids that he has made. You probably own one of his hybrids even if you don't know Kelly. On Tuesday, 17 September, Kelly will also be giving a talk to the San Francisco Succulent and Cactus Society on Mexico, but the focus will be succulents.

Roger Lane signed up for refreshments this month. Any additional refreshments will be appreciated.

The Conservatory of Flowers when we left; Some of our members at the entrance to the building; beautiful John Molnar and Gary Turner inspecting *Guzmania conifera* . (All photos are courtesy of Peter Wan.)



August Meeting

We had a great turnout to inspect the plants of the Conservatory of Flowers after hours!

Last month, we visited the Conservatory of Flowers in Golden Gate Park. We were fortunate to be able to observe the plants in a leisurely fashion because the facility had closed to the public. Whenever we visit the Conservatory we have a large turnout and last month was no exception. Before we even got into the building we were treated to spectacular dahlias

In full flower near where most of us parked our vehicles. Most were hybrids with knockout flowers.

In the Lilly pond room, there were many bromeliads and several were in flower. The biggest bromeliad probably was the *Alcantarea imperialis* at the peak of its bloom. But there was also a pineapple and the spineless *Aechmea fasciata* in

flower. This clone is huge - big leaves and big flower spike.

In the room next to the Lilly pond room, there were also many bromeliads in flower, but less than your editor has seen on previous visits. This room has many orchids and the orchid fanciers were testing their naming abilities when they saw

A gigantic pineapple was in flower beside the Lilly pond.

an orchid in flower.

The room with the some of the home plants, such as the bird's nest fern has a lot of uncommon plants as well. Each room we visited had plenty of flowering plants that were growing flawlessly.

We all survived the room with

the carnivorous plants as well as the many creatures in the main room (recordings of monkeys and other unknown creatures).

Our host, **Mario Vega**, took some members into the growing areas for all the plants and allowed us to use the entrance lobby for our



refreshments. We all had an enjoyable visit thanks to Mario and the people who are growing the plants so well.

Peruvian Discovery



Aechmea Pink Goddess - a cultivar of *Aechmea chantinii*



Aechmea nidularioides



Aechmea poitaei

Photos are courtesy of the Florida Council of Bromeliad Societies

In the summer of 1961, a personal ‘expedition’ into the jungles of Peru became a compelling necessity (and an expedition of discovery) for Jack Holmes, a well-known nurseryman from Tampa, Florida. He had introduced to the public the variety of *Aechmea chantinii* known as “Pink Goddess”, a plant which proved to be more than twice the size of the ordinary *Aechmea chantinii* and startling because of the vivid pink color of its bracts. If a plant like this had existed in Peru and no one had known of it, Holmes wondered how many more astonishing bromeliads were yet to be discovered. He decided to go to Peru himself to see whether the jungles held any more unknown beauties. Being a nurseryman and a businessman, he felt his appraisal of such plants would be practical and discriminating.

On such a trip one would have to penetrate deep into the jungles, not just skirt the edges. It was his contention that the bromeliads that had been introduced into cultivation were those that were easily available; in other words, they were the plants that grew near towns or roads. But, what kinds existed deep in the rain forests, far up the rivers, secreted in grassy clearings? With all this to find out, the intrigue and romance of far away places became irresistible.

The hazards, toil, preparation, and expense of such a trip may have been the reason that a national authority on bromeliads had made the statement that “no great bromeliad has ever been found in the Peru-Amazon basin area.” Quite possibly, Jack Holmes thought the

reason was that no one had really wanted to face the risks or trouble to find out.

Holmes had all the ‘makings’ of such a trip ready and at hand. It was his financing of airplane searches by Lee Moore in 1961 and 1962 that had brought out the ‘Pink Goddess’. When, in the winter of 1962-63, Moore reported the finding of a new and equally sensational bromeliad he called ‘Fabulous Orange’, Holmes’ mind was made up. Moore stated that this new plant had much larger blooms, which opened to a cherry-red and softened to a brilliant orange (a color it held for months).

So it was, after instructing Moore to make all arrangements, that Jack Holmes and Carl Cowgill, another leading Florida nurseryman, flew to Lima, Peru in July 1963. After a three day tour of this now- modern city resembling Los Angeles with its buildings, wide streets, mountains and canyons during which they traveled from sea-level to over 10,000 feet altitude between breakfast and dinner, they took off on a four-hour flight across the Andes to Iquitos, some 800 miles north and east - on the banks of the Amazon River. This jungle city, over 2300 miles up the Amazon, is the port for ships from the Atlantic Ocean, although it is just a few hundred miles from the Pacific on the other side of the Andes.

Here, they met Lee Moore and completed all preparations. A large low motor launch with a crew of three and ample supplies

took them out on their “hardening up” cruise for 4 days. During this time they ranged the Amazon’s two to four mile width, penetrated its shore, collected plants, and learned of the hazards of insects, animals, vines, plants, swamps, and low lands.

They learned that the ‘Fabulous Orange’ was the only plant of its kind that Moore or his wife had ever found, and they could not find any other. This one plant had been found high on a tree, far back on a jungle road. Given the opportunity to examine this bromeliad closely in Moore’s nursery, both Holmes and Cowgill were certain that they had ever seen anything to match its size, color and lush growth. To find the source of this wonderful bromeliad became their passion.

Within a week, the search was on its way. They went some sixty miles down the Amazon to the mouth of the Napa River where Moore had found the ‘Pink Goddess’. The explorers decided that if they did no more than search this area for finer kinds of ‘Pink Goddess’, the trip would pay for itself.

Floating along the ever-widening sluggish-brown Amazon, all members of the party were glued to their binoculars, searching the trees along the shore for bright splashes of color - evidence of native bromeliad colonies that could lead to new discoveries. They also sought native villages to question the inhabitants about the plants in the area and to replenish food supplies because their limited cargo space made it necessary to “live off the country.”

Surprisingly, they found that while their food purchases were native products such as yucca roots (which are boiled or fried like potatoes), bananas, papaya, pineapple, dried fish, eggs, and chickens, the break was ‘United States’, being made from flour imported from here! They dipped water from the Amazon; let it settle overnight, when as much as two inches of silt would drop to the bottom of a five-gallon jug. They then filtered and boiled it.

All along the Amazon they found their questions about the huge flowers they sought brought answers telling them that the promising treasures were farther down the river or in inaccessible jungles. They also learned about the “trochas”, which are machete-cut trails leading back through the forests to natural clearings where the Indians grow little patches of yucca, corn, bananas, and other produce. Except for these farming patches at the end of the trochas, all life is along and

and within a half mile of the rivers, and seldom, if ever, do white men penetrate deeper. Later, a troche was to bring the explorers to one of their most inspiring finds.

At the mouth of the Naspa River, the Amazon is so wide that the far shore cannot be seen and the party found that turning from the Amazon into the Napa was no Sunday afternoon excursion. Here, the relatively fast flowing Naspa is stopped by the giant Amazon and deposits its silt in a huge muddy delta where the motor with its whirling propeller could no little more than stir the mud like a Mixmaster stirring a cake batter. The guides had to go over the side of the boat to wade and push while the others rowed like galley slaves.

But the reward for this early morning labor (the half-mile of “puddling” and the two hours work) was quick in coming. They had hardly begun to enjoy the motor’s purring when they spied a huge mass of red high up in a giant tree, which towered over its fellows in the jungle. The embankment rose at least a hundred feet above the river and the mass of red was 125 feet up the trunk of the 200-foot tree. Careful scrutiny by all three members of the party led to the verdict that here was something different and the time had come to land and investigate.

Here they learned why Moore had been so insistent on the qualification of his guides - they must be good climbers. The boss guide quickly earned a change from his given name of Elroy to Tarzan. For the first 50 or 60 feet, the trunk of the tree was too huge and too smooth to scale, but draped from its branches was the kind of vine that made Tarzan famous and was now to do the same for Elroy. Climbing these convenient vines as if they were ropes, Elroy was soon up in the branches gracefully swinging his way upwards. From below, the watchers were fascinated by the graceful way he progressed, almost daintily, seeming to investigate each handhold and foothold with nimble and exploratory touches. The reason for this caution was soon obvious when an avalanche of ants, tarantulas and a tree sloth tumbled down. All of these can bite; particularly the ants that are a special breed, often one inch long with a stinger half their length.

Elroy lowered the plant carefully. Moore’s first exclamation was, “We’ve found the ‘Fabulous Orange’!” And truly, they had. It checked out in every way. It was an almost perfect plant, at the height of its bloom. Within a few hours, a score of similar plants were located in nearby trees. With a large assortment to choose from, only the most perfectly developed specimens were

carefully packed.

In honor of Jack Holmes and his expedition, this new plant was identified and named *Streptocalyx holmesii*. The inflorescence of the collected plants were always over 2 feet tall, with several measuring as much as thirty inches. The lower 10 to 12 inches were covered with petals 2 to 3 inches wide and up to 6 inches long so the bloom measured 11 to 12 inches. Above the petals arose 12 to 15 inches of brilliant bracts loaded with plump yellow pods, each ending in a curled white tip like a candle flame - from which small white flowers sprouted. The upper petals were a bright cherry-red with the lower petals mellowing to a brilliant orange, which lasted for weeks. The broad leaves were 4 to 5 inches wide and over 2 feet long and opened in a vase-like formation. The leaves varied from bright red when grown in the sun to deep green when shaded by overhanging foliage. Holmes felt assured that he had obtained a true strain that would never disappoint him.

This treasure trove had its exciting effect on all 3 men. They felt nothing but the urge to push on for they believed that the next 10 miles would surely unveil other wonderful plants. So with undue haste, they broke camp to seek more bromeliads.

The party's next find was a lucky accident. They had stopped at a tiny village to shop and talk about their new bromeliads and to ask where other plants might be found. The Indians were friendly and this was most important because at previous stops the party had encountered nothing but wild cries and apparently abusive language. They had found to their deep disappointment that the tales of unfriendly savages were not just for tourist entertainment. But, in this instance, the natives were cooperative and told about huge red flower balls growing on the ground along the village's trocha about a mile in the jungle.

Threading one's way through this jungle troche was a real thrill and the party felt as if they were Spanish conquistadores exploring the unknown wilds. Often barely wide enough for a man's shoulders and often so low it was necessary to duck and crouch. The path was bathed in green luminosity untouched by direct sunlight. The spell was complete when suddenly the men walked into a brilliant cathedral-like clearing - the ceiling consisting of the blue sky and the floor a carpet of lush green studded with the biggest, reddest "roses" they had ever seen.

These red roses proved to be bromeliad blooms of a kind and shape no one in the party had ever seen. Centered in the heart of a spray of low-spread leaves a few inches wide

and over 2 feet long was a fat round pine cone of blazing red. What they had found was *Aechmea nidularioides*, a plant that had been lost for years. Each bloom was a cone-shaped rosette as much as 10 inches across at the bottom and 10 inches high with triangulated petals folded straight down along each edge to present a solidity of shape and fleshy thickness. The members of the party stood in awe at the edge of the clearing, looking down on what must have been thousands of plants growing so closely together that their foliage made them look like a fern-covered entanglement. The afternoon was spent finding the best specimens. And that night was again an evening of relaxation and congratulations.

Finding 2 such spectacular plants within a matter of a few days brought the trip to an anti-climax; the party felt that nothing more could be found. This proved true when the original Pink Goddess grounds were reached and explored. In spite of thorough searching, inspecting, and checking, nothing else of any consequence could be found. Instead, it was Holmes' conclusion that the new clones of this *Aechmea* that he had developed in his nurseries had progressed far beyond the original plant and that his careful hybridizing had developed the inflorescence to its maximum. Whereas native plants still show the usual green and white striped leaves, his "Ash Blonde" provides dull pewter-gray foliage, entirely new to this variety. His developing plum shades and other colorings give promise of other intriguing variations. No plants were taken out.

Lee Moore flew to Tampa in December of 1967 to help with this article and discuss improved kinds of bromeliads they had found in addition to the above. They brought out the first *Aechmea tillandsioides* to be taken from this area. They also brought out a better form of *Aechmea poitaei*. (This plant has been misnamed as *Aechmea nidularioides* in Wilson's book 'Bromeliads in Cultivation.')

Although the finds on this expedition represent a real stride in bromeliad beauty, they are possibly just an indication of the wonders that can be found in the Upper Amazon and Peru region. The difficulties and expense of entering this area certainly seem justified and may be the only reason that no great bromeliads had come from there before.

(Article by Harold Slingerland is reprinted from the October 1985 newsletter of the Bromeliad Society of Northern California.)

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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