

ENVIRONMENT

Anthurium: an arrow to the heart

By AIDAN FARRELL

ROSES are red, violets are blue, anthuriums are heart-shaped and last longer too. Every Valentine's Day the busy intersections and gas station forecourts are festooned with single red roses. What more fitting a tribute to your beloved? Well, in Hawaii at least, the heart-shaped bloom of the anthurium is seen as a more appropriate, amatory acknowledgement. Certainly Mother Earth must appreciate the reduced air miles needed to provide this locally grown bloom.

Anthurium plants, sometimes known as "tail flowers", are native to the Americas, where the genus is widespread in tropical regions. Anthurium is one of the largest genera known to science, with close to 1,000 species. Certainly more prolific than its temperate rival, the rose genus (to which the rose belongs). The name comes from the Greek 'anthos' meaning flower and 'oura' meaning tail - a reference to the spike that emerges from the flower's intersection. This spike is technically a spadix and is characteristic of the Arum family, to which the genus belongs. The tropical bloom is also more fecund than its temperate rival, for this spadix holds not one reproductive flower but hundreds, all held aloft the sensuous, heart-shaped bloom which is referred to as a spathe.

As a botanist I find this blatant display of sexuality to be almost porno-



THE brightly-coloured "petal" of an anthurium is really a modified leaf.

graphic, but anthurium andraeanum is undoubtedly a useful flower to have around. This particular species is known as the "flamingo flower" in the English-speaking world and "flamant rose" in French. It is found in homes and hotels across Trinidad, but its native distribution is restricted to the foothills of Colombia and Ecuador where it grows in the forest understory, often attached to tree trunks. The species' botanical name is taken from Édouard André, a French garden designer and botanist who acquired specimens in 1876, following a collecting trip to the Andes. The species was introduced to the Caribbean in 1915 by Eugene André,

a Trinidadian naturalist (remarkably Eugene André appears to have no direct relationship to Édouard André, who had already died before this species reached Trinidad). Here it was planted beneath cocoa and citrus stands as an additional income source. Cultivation of South American varieties for export remained a significant industry here until the 1970s.

Today the industry relies on a more intensive production system, with a multitude of varieties neatly ordered into rows within vast shade-houses. The modern varieties were largely developed in Holland and Hawaii, specifically for use as cut flowers.



These include many large, showy blooms with evocative names like 'Fantasia', 'Showbiz' and 'Madame Butterfly'. Some of these blooms last an extraordinarily long time when placed in a vase, beyond 40 days in some cases, far in excess of even the most committed rose. Indeed the romantics will be charmed to hear that the showy spathe that forms the heart-shaped bloom is not strictly speaking a petal, but rather is a modified leaf. In nature this modified leaf acts as a bright flag to attract insects (including flies, bees, beetles and ants) to the microscopic flowers on the spadix. Once the flowers are fertilised the leaf reverts to the more usual green colour and provides energy for the developing seeds. Surely this is a better statement of love than the ephemeral and pompous petals of the rose?

There are seven species from the Anthurium genus that are native to Trinidad, perhaps the most notable of which is Anthurium hookeri, some-

times known as the Bird's Nest Anthurium. The native distribution of Anthurium hookeri ranges from St Lucia in the north to Venezuela and the Guyanas in the south. Like the flamingo flower, they are usually found in the forest understory nestled among tree roots or perched on trunks and branches. It is one of the largest anthuriums known; the enormous wedge-shaped leaves help collect rainwater and channel it down to the densely-packed roots that typically hang freely in the air. The flower-bearing spike is also enormous - at least five times the length of a typical flamingo flower. This purple spike stands proud above a simple white spathe, but the display is brief and once fertilised the spike produces a multitude of pearl-white berries that hangs limp among the leaves.

As for St Valentine, I will leave it to the reader to decide if the flamingo flower's bloom is best described as heart-shaped or arrow-shaped, both equally associated with the cheekiest of cherubs.

For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@tfncc.org or visit our website at www.tfncc.org. The Club's next monthly meeting will be held today at St. Mary's College, PoS. Today's lecture: "The Sargassum event and the RGB algae of TT" by Lori Lee Lum of the Institute of Marine Affairs.

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