

ENVIRONMENT

Chaconier

Flame of the forest

AS the nation's celebration of our independence draws near, it is a good time to have a good look at some of our national symbols. This week we feature the national flower of Trinidad and Tobago – the chaconier.

Perhaps you have seen them while you were hiking through the forest on your way to some picturesque waterfall or maybe you were driving to Maracas or Blanchisseuse and noticed the scarlet blooms at the roadside. Whatever the nature of your encounter, a chaconier tree in full bloom is a sight to behold.

These magnificent plants are common throughout the country in suitable habitats. It favours the shade of the forest understorey and can grow as tall as ten metres. Outside of Trinidad and Tobago, it can be found through much of South and Central America.

The chaconier (*Warszewiczia coccinea*), of course, was selected by the national Emblems Selection Committee in 1962 to be our national flower. The basis for this decision was supposedly that “as an indigenous flower, it has been witness to our entire history”.

However there are some misconcep-



THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

tions that have surfaced over the years which, despite the efforts of many stalwarts of our natural history including (but not limited to) Ian Lambie, Julian Duncan and Julian Kenny, seem to have become embedded as part of our historical narrative. Indeed, the following has been told and retold many, many times.

Firstly, it is widely publicised at this time of year that our national plant was given its common name in tribute to Governor Don Jose Maria Chacon. This, however, is not true. The chaconier derives its name from the chaconne, which is a form of 17th century dance from Europe in which the

dancers were adorned with small streamers. These streamers fluttered as the dancer moved, much as our chaconier's petals move with the wind. This then, as was first argued by the late Dr Dennis Adams, is the true origin of the name.

Following from this first error, the name of this plant, as you would have realised by now, should not be spelt “chaconia.” The original name is the chaconier. The latter carries the “-ier” suffix, which betrays its origin as a French word referencing the chaconne dance. The emblem selection committee, it seems, assumed a link between the local name “chaconier” and Governor Chacon without realising the origins of the word and proceeded to cement its spelling into history as the “chaconia.”

A third misconception surrounds the flowering season for the chaconier. It is sometimes stated that the chaconier was selected as a symbol because it blooms on August 31 (ie Independence Day). In reality, chaconiers will bloom throughout the rainy season and can even occasionally be seen in bloom during the dry season if triggered by a burst of rainfall.



THE DOUBLE chaconier has more sepals than single chaconier. It is unique to Trinidad.



THE chaconier was selected in 1962 to be our national flower.

The bloom itself may mislead the casual onlooker. The entire inflorescence is not a single flower as you might be tempted to think. Instead, it is made up of as many as 800 individual flowers! The red bits are sepals and the petals are actually the smaller yellow parts at the base of the red sepals.

Last but not least, there is widespread

misunderstanding over the difference between the single chaconier and the double chaconier.

Around this time of year, the newspapers are filled with patriotic images as commercial institutions celebrate with eye-catching advertisements.

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Double flower unique to TT

•FLOWER from Page 6B

UNFORTUNATELY, these advertisements almost invariably use the image of the double chaconia. What is a double chaconier you ask?

Simply put, it is a mutation of the naturally occurring single chaconier. In 1957, an unusual looking chaconier was spotted along the Arima-Blanchisseuse road by Grace Mulloon, David Auyong and an unidentified third person. Here was a chaconier which had multiple red sepals instead of one red sepal as is normal. This was a one in a million natural mutation and these three nature lovers had stumbled upon it. Auyong secured cuttings of this plant which, with the help of Roy Nichols of the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture, would eventually be successfully propagated. It was not long after its discovery that the original plant growing at the roadside in Blanchisseuse was destroyed during road works. The material that

Auyong had saved was all that was left of this remarkable mutation. Indeed, every single double chaconier you see growing today is a clone of that original plant.

Therefore, while the double chaconier is not a separate species (it is recognised as *Warszewiczia coccinea* cv "David Auyong"), it is not the same plant we chose as our national symbol. It is therefore debatable which plant should really be our national flower. Should it be the single chaconier – the plant originally envisaged by the emblem selection committee and which has been a part of TT's biota long before our islands were colonised? Or should it be changed to the double chaconier which is unique to TT and already widely used in renditions of our national flower?

Today's feature was written by Kris Sookdeo. For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit our website at www.ttfnc.org. The Club's next monthly meeting will be held on Thursday September 11 at St Mary's College, POS. Lecture: "Recording the biodiversity of TT" presented by Mike Rutherford of the UWI Zoology Museum.