

BERKSHIRE HOME & STYLE

JUNE 2011

COMPLIMENTARY



GARDEN

by Honey Sharp

Stories Orchids Tell

From the Swamps of Florida to the Cloud Forests of Peru

"You can get off alcohol, drugs, women, food and cars, but once you're hooked on orchids, you're finished. You never get off orchids... never."

Joe Kunisch, orchid grower, Rochester, NY

There are places in Peru's rain forest where, according to Stig Dalström, a Swedish horticulturist, no one has ventured. Such places are home to many yet to be discovered botanical treasures.

The orchid species, the world's oldest flowering plant, dating back to the dinosaur age, is one such gold mine. "Peru may one day be recognized as number one when it comes to orchids," explained Dalström when I met him recently in Peru. Currently, Ecuador boasts 4,000 orchid species with Columbia and New Guinea next on the top ten list. As a point of reference, orchids form the largest family of flowering plants, with between 20,000 and 30,000 species currently identified. Many more are waiting to be discovered.

Today, Dalström, a passionate orchid connoisseur, botanical illustrator and former Curator of the Orchid Identification Center at the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota, Florida, is working on a documentary film series entitled, *Wild Orchid Man*. Collaborating with Darryl Soyfer, an American documentary filmmaker, composer and musician, the two are gradually making their way into this rich and diverse Peruvian biosphere. They also belong to the growing number of people who are sharing the stories orchids tell.

Back in April, I had the good fortune to come across Dalström and Soyfer filming in Machu Picchu, the world-renowned Inca site, considered one of the seven wonders of the world. Also known as "The Lost City," it was discovered just a hundred years ago by Hiram Bingham, a Yale University archeologist.

Working on their film "The Journey to Machu Picchu," the two happened to be staying at our ecolodge, Inkaterria, which also serves as headquarters for the 'Reserva ecologica.' With over 42,000 acres teeming with flora including 372 orchid species and fauna, such as an Andean bear on the endangered species list, Inkaterria is an ecological success story. Formerly a clear-cut tea plantation, it has reverted to its natural state thanks to the vision of its founder, Joe Koechlin, an ardent conserva-



The red orchid, *Masdevallia veitchiana*, a national treasure in Peru. Photo by Honey Sharp

tionist. Also a businessman, he was the Peruvian film producer for Werner Herzog's films, *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* and *Fitzcarraldo*.

While pointing out some of its botanical treasures, the conservation program's director, Carmen Soto, concurred with the film makers that Peru's biodiversity is one of the richest on the planet. Designated "A Sanctuary for Natural Conservation" in 1981, Machu Picchu has also been privy to the research of the Harvard University biologist and conservationist, A.O. Wilson, as well as the prestigious Missouri Botanical Garden. For the film team, invited by Inkaterria, it was both a destination and a gateway.

Until now, I had envisioned Machu Picchu, ("Old Peak" in the native Quechua), as an Inca site, comparable to Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Built in the 15th century, just prior to the Spanish conquistador, Pizarro's invasion, as a majestic royal city surrounded by terraces cascading down the steep mountains, its cloud forest, host to countless species of birds, butterflies, trees and epiphytes, is breathtakingly beautiful. As Hiram Bingham romantically put it: "Not only has it great snow peaks looming above the clouds more than two miles overhead; gigantic precipices of many-colored granite...foaming, glistening, roaring rapids, it has also, in striking contrast, orchids and tree ferns, the delectable beauty of luxurious vegetation and the mysterious witchery of the jungle."

Orchids indeed are bewitching. Susan Orlean's book, "The Orchid Thief," about a man's obsession with a rare and mysterious orchid in the swamps of southern Florida was a bestseller. And then there is the film, *Adaptation* starring Meryl Streep.

Upon first meeting Stig Dalström in the Andes, I

Classical Texts

403-437-4275
classicaltexts.com

wondered if he just might be "the" orchid thief. After all, as his film associate, Darryl Soyfer, pointed out, he is known by friends and associates as the "Wild Orchid Man." In addition, Orlean's very same Florida orchid (*Dendrophylax lindenii*) is the star of the first film of their series, *The Ghost Orchid Swamp*. As a professional orchid taxonomist, however, it should come as no surprise that Dalström would find himself in the eye of a Florida hurricane, in this case, a famous botanical legal hurricane in 2002 at the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota.

It revolved around a Peruvian lady slipper, *Phragmipedium kovachii*, that had been smuggled into Miami by a Michael Kovach (and hence "baptized" *kovachii*). Not wasting any time, Kovach brought it for official identification to the Selby Gardens, known worldwide for its collection of exquisite orchids. It seemed to be the perfect place; the procedure, however, was less than perfect.

According to a reporter, Craig Pitman, who covered the story in depth for the *St. Petersburg Times* and is now writing "The Scent of a Scandal," "When Kovach carried that lady slipper orchid into a roomful of scientists at Selby Gardens...he was greeted by a simultaneous wave of eye-widening and mouth opening." No wonder. This was a gargantuan, flamboyant, fuchsia colored orchid. And, it was like hitting the jackpot for Selby.

At the time, Dalström was working as a volunteer research associate on the Selby team that identified it and published their findings, thereby giving it official status. Not so fast. The Peruvian Government soon asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to investigate the matter and return the orchid. (All species of *Phragmipedium* are protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species or CITES, which prohibits their trade without proper supervision.) The legal saga, which became a major scandal for the Gardens, dragged on for a couple of years. Numerous board members resigned and the director of Selby was ousted.

continued on page 14

