Inkaterra, Part 2

Orchid Gardens and Reserves
Text by Thomas Mirenda/Photographs by Carmen Soto

LAST MONTH, I introduced you to the fabulous paradise that is Inkaterra's garden near Machu Picchu in Peru. Although the cloud forests in the region spanning from Cusco to Machu Picchu may be among the most visited in the world due to the thousands of people hiking the Inca Trail or visiting the spectacular ancient citadel, fewer visitors realize the botanical richness present there. Orchids, a huge component of this opulent biodiversity are sometimes overshadowed by colorful fuchsias, bromeliads, aroids, heliconias and palms, as so many orchids are of modest size and coloration. Often it is these smaller, subtler orchids that are the most interesting ecologically and display the most compelling physical features. Pleurothallids and maxillarids in particular, are extremely well represented.


Thomas Mirenda

Carmen Soto's orchid team is a group of brilliant explorers and climbers, often ascending extremely steep, practically vertical landscapes in search of species new to science. Carmen and I share a particular appreciation for rarely grown, truly difficult genera such as *Brachionidium* and *Trichosalpinx* that hardly anyone has seen or been able to cultivate. These difficult, very high elevation plants survive well in the orchid garden as it is close enough to their natural habitat for them to adapt. Plants such as these can only be seen by the average person in an orchid garden such as the one surrounding the Inkaterra Pueblo Hotel. Finding them in the wild would necessitate extremely hazardous mountain climbing and outstanding physical fitness!

These rare and spectacular, sensitive alpine plants may be among the species most at risk due to climate change. If temperatures in their habitat warm too much, too quickly, their only recourse is to continue to colonize ever higher elevations. If this happens too rapidly, such plants cannot keep up and will be lost forever to extinction. How wonderful that places such as Inkaterra exist and can serve as repositories for these otherwise inaccessible and uncultivable species. We


***Anguloa virginalis*, one of the tulip orchids.**

The exquisite flowers of *Brachionidium carmeniae* are little more than ½ inch (1.5 cm) long.

need to establish orchid gardens such as this one in all the ecological regions of the earth.

The Inkaterra organization maintains several other reserves in other parts of Peru (both lowland and highland areas) where they plan to replicate the success of the orchid gardens near Machu Picchu. My next installment in this series will feature some of the reserves that are currently being developed for the future.

— Tom Mirenda has been working professionally with orchids for over three decades. He is an AOS accredited judge and is the chairman of the American Orchid Society's Conservation Committee. He recently coauthored The Book of Orchids: A life-size guide to 600 species fromaround theworld (email: biophiliak@ gmail.com).

[1] *Cyrtochilum volubile*. The 2-inch (5-cm) flowers are carried on long, wiry inflorescences that can be up to 23 feet (7 m) long!

[2] *Elleanthus conifer*. Not often seen in cultivation today, these *Sobralia* relatives can be quite striking in their own right.

[3] Left to right: Richar Acuña, Ermitaño Quispe, Carmen Soto (with the camera) and Modesto Villavicencio. Others on Carmen's team not pictured are German Villena, Ciro Auccayllo, Rómulo Cabrera, Braulio Supa, Victoriano Zárate and Juan Carlos Pacheco.

[4] The striking flowers of *Oncidium wyattianum* can reach 3 inches (8 cm) in diameter.

[5] *Lycaste macrophylla* is a very variable species widespread from Costa Rica and Panama to the north southward into Peru and Venezuela.