



# Tropical Rainbow, Flower Paradise

By Héctor Méndez Caratini, HSPR Member

An ancient legend tells of the sacred mountain of Helicon, in southern Greece, the home of the muses. The nine mythological divinities were the daughters of Zeus, the king of the gods, and Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. They presided over the arts and sciences and inspired artists, poets, philosophers and musicians. They also sang songs about the origins of the world and its inhabitants. This is the origin of the close relationship between the colorful heliconias and the genus *Musa*, the bananas and plantains.

In the Emerald of the South of Borinquen, at 2,000 feet elevation, under the shadow of Torrecilla Peak, the legendary Marín Alto Tropicals farm is located. The muses Judy Nelson and Susan Brooks, together with Dr. Harold Kelly Brooks and their 16 dogs, carefully look after their exquisite and beloved plants. This majestic rainforest is home to more than 150 different varieties of heliconias and gingers in Puerto Rico. Distributed throughout the tropical regions of the world there are approximately 220 heliconia species and more than 1000 different species of gingers.

Having graduated from Harvard with two doctorates, one in biology and the other in geology, Dr. Kelly Brooks was distinguished as a professor of paleobotany, geology and marine biology at the University of Florida. During his scientific research, diving in the sea in the Bahamas, he also took advantage of his free time to collect rare orchids and bromeliads. As an academic with a love for field collecting, his botanical interests later

took him to Mexico, where he acquired different varieties of anthuriums.

After a long and successful academic career he decided to retire from teaching. At 52 years of age, he began a search to find the ideal place to move from Gainesville, Florida. He wanted to achieve his life dream, the creation of his own botanical garden filled with exotic tropical flowers. Accompanied by his wife Susan and his faithful dog Dawg, Dr. Brooks made innumerable exploratory flights in his private Cessna 210 plane. During 1981, he traveled throughout Central America, looking at different properties in Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, and almost all the Caribbean islands, from Grenada to the Bahamas. He soon realized the fact that his expeditions always ended up in Puerto Rico.



Dr. Kelly Brooks shows off several lovely *Heliconia orthotricha* selections he collected in Ecuador.

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### Dates to Remember

- HSPR Meeting, 10:00 am, Sunday, December 11, 2005. Farm of Sergio and Nancy Tejedor, Carr. 528, Km. 4.6, Jayuya, PR.

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As he explored the island, at a rural roadside store, he learned that there was a farm for sale in the Marín Alto area of Patillas. After detailed consultation of his geological maps, he decided to establish a farm inside a forest located in the green mountains north of Patillas. There he found the ideal soil for agriculture, abundant rainfall, land with good drainage and nice neighbors. Over time he purchased a total of 150 acres of four bordering farms to establish his own business. From the highest point of the property there is a panoramic view of the exuberant vegetation, toward a lake and the turquoise-blue waters of the Caribbean Sea.

When they began the difficult task of land clearing and planting, Susan didn't hesitate to invite her childhood friend Judy Nelson, from Gainesville, to help with the business administration. At that time, Judy was in Venezuela, where she was teaching physical education with the Peace Corps. During the three years that she lived in the Pascuas Valley, she had not only become proficient in Spanish, but had learned how to relate to the Hispanic culture in rural communities. This experience would prove invaluable as personnel administrator of the business. Meanwhile, Dr. Brooks made the technical decisions, such as deciding which varieties of plants to cultivate in sun or shade, and in which area of the farm to plant them.

Early in the development of the property they planted more than 80 varieties of palms and trees from Malaysia and the Amazon. In the beginning they were dedicated exclusively to the culture of anthuriums under optimum greenhouse conditions, becoming internationally renowned for the quality of their agricultural products. Eight years later, catastrophe struck. Hurricane Hugo totally destroyed their efforts, and they had to start all over again. Faced by the devastation, they decided to replant with new varieties of ornamental plants.

Dr. Brooks immediately initiated a series of trips to Central and South America with the goal of collecting and introducing new varieties of heliconias to Puerto Rico. He traveled seven times to Caracas, where he established an intimate friendship with the director of the Venezuelan Botanical Garden and initiated an exchange of plants between the two sister countries. On these trips, he obtained the colorful *Heliconia hirsuta* 'Halloween', *H. bihai* 'Aurea Sunrise', and *H. bihai* 'Guapa'. Later, he donated a generous amount of these plants to the Botanical Garden of the University of Puerto Rico, in Río Piedras.

On other occasions, he traveled extensively through Ecuador. Over 12 years ago, accompanied by an indigenous woman carrying a backpack and with a revolver in her belt, he explored the remote Amazon jungles. While workers were deforesting the jungle to build new highways, and the natives were hunting with their rustic blowguns, the collector obtained his precious *H. chartacea* 'Sexy Pink', *H. orthotricha*

'Guacamayo', *H. aemygdiana*, and *H. vellerigera* 'King Kong'.

On his two trips to Brazil he found the hybrid *H. bihai x caribaea* 'Hot Rio Nites' (also known as 'Dimitri Sucre') and other strictas with large red flowers that are still not officially registered. The cultivated varieties of *H. caribaea* come from



**Dr. Kelly Brooks, Susan Brooks, and Judy Nelson with two of their dogs at Marín Alto Tropicals, in Patillas.**

the island of Martinique, and in Grenada he obtained the four varieties of *H. bihai* 'Sunset', *H. bihai x caribaea* 'Yellow Dolly', *H. bihai* 'Arawak', and *H. bihai x caribaea* 'Criswick'. Interestingly, it was within nutmeg plantations where he could get, with the permission of the property owner, the majority of these rhizomes, which grew wild and were considered endemic weeds among the farmers.

When all these plants were finally established, the devastating Hurricane Hortense brought more than two feet of rainfall and left them without phone service for six months. With this adversity, Susan and Judy acquired a new perspective on life. Together they went to San Juan to put an advertisement in the yellow pages of the phone book. While there they met someone who casually introduced them to their next date with destiny. In 1991 they met Félix Santos and his partner Jim Wise, of Caribbean Cuts Company, who made them an offer they couldn't refuse, to grow together in the business of selling flowers in New York City.

They began their innovative export business by selling their first three boxes of flowers. In the same way, Caribbean Cuts started selling their merchandise out of the back of a truck parked on the side of 28th Street in Manhattan. Later, as the



## Tropical Rainbow, Flower Paradise (continued)

volume of business kept growing, they moved to a second floor location, and opened a store with more space, becoming the exclusive distributor of tropical flowers in the city. The heliconias were purchased by floral designers for corporate clients and famous institutions, like Trump Plaza, Rockefeller Plaza, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In 1993, designer David Pursley contacted members of the Puerto Rican Horticulture Society, Miguel Calzada, Manolín Pérez Mirai, Pablo Sastre, and Inés Rodríguez, for suggestions on new ideas to incorporate into the famous Philadelphia Flower Show. Under the theme “Islands Under the Sun”, Marín Alto Tropicals was selected to represent us as cultural ambassadors in the largest flower show in the world.

A year later Mr. Sastre, accompanied by landscape architect Adriano Rogés, completed the design for the “Rainforest Arch”. The arch was visibly located at the main entrance of the event, and more than 200,000 visitors passed through it. It was 10 feet tall and 60 feet wide, and was totally covered with flowers and foliage from 73 eight foot long boxes, all provided by Marín Alto Tropicals.

While it snowed outside, in the more than 10 acres of plants and warm temperatures inside the show, the exotic flowers of Puerto Rico were a big hit. Thousands of Puerto Ricans from Pennsylvania and New York could appreciate and feel proud of the beautiful flora from their place of birth. Soon the word was out, like lightning among the public, the pleasant news that, within the lush vegetation there was a Borinquen coqui. While the Puerto Ricans wept with joy to hear the symbol of our national symbol, the press and television welcomed them with informative news reports that emphasized the cute stow-away.



**Judy Nelson surrounded by the beautiful Marín Alto Tropicals exhibit at the Aibonito Flower Festival.**

On his return to the island, Dr. Brooks returned the famous amphibian to his native land so he could tell the story of his incredible odyssey in the frigid winter of the United States to his family members. As a related fact, Inés Rodríguez took advantage of the opportunity, and published, for the Luis Muñoz Marín Foundation, a touching children’s story inspired by this true event.

At the present time, Marín Alto Tropicals provides full time employment to a dozen workers in an economically disadvantaged area, and has become an integral part of the community. The employees are proud of their work and appreciate that the product of their hands gets exhibited prominently in the windows of the exclusive Tiffany Jewelers and in prestigious hotels and restaurants in the Big Apple.

With tenacity and perseverance, Dr. Brooks’ dream has become a reality in Puerto Rico. His exclusive botanical garden is a replica of a tropical paradise. The hills, meticulously carpeted with 50,000 heliconias and gingers, are home to over one hundred exotic varieties of flowers collected from the most remote corners of the planet. Twenty four years after becoming established in Puerto Rico, they are exporting an average of 2,000 pounds of high quality flowers weekly.

They also sell flowers locally for special events, private parties and weddings. Plants are also sold at the many agricultural fairs that are held in different municipalities of the island. Accompanied by members of the Puerto Rican Horticulture Society, they exhibit their flowers in the principal shopping centers of San Juan, Caguas, Bayamón, Ponce and Hatillo, among others.

Even though the Brooks are considered pioneers in the culture of tropical flowers, it should be pointed out that in Puerto Rico there were already several varieties of native tropical flowers—such as *Calathea lutea*, the “Puerto Rican cigar”, and yellow *Heliconia caribaea*. Other varieties, like *Heliconia rostrata* (commonly called “lobster tail”) and *Heliconia platystachys*, had been imported during the 1960’s by Pennock Gardens and several collectors who had introduced them from Peru.

At the present time, there are three organizations in Puerto Rico (Heliconia Society of Puerto Rico, Inc., Zingiberales Gardens and the Puerto Rican Horticulture Society) whose members, inspired by the muses, actively study and collect heliconias and gingers in their private gardens. Among these, a few are especially known for their beauty: Endre Guttman’s Zingiberales Gardens in Río Grande, Dr. Sergio Tejedor’s Heliconias Santa Rosa in Jayuya, Dr. Germán Charrón’s farm in Corozal, and needless to say, pioneer Dr. Brooks, Susan and Judy’s legendary Marín Alto Tropicals farm, in Patillas.

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**Assistant Editor:** Mrs. Emilia (Sherry) Ballester

P.O. Box 3295  
Carolina, Puerto Rico 00984-3295  
Phone: 787-886-3147  
Fax: 1-240-238-7366  
Email: brbrunner@yahoo.com



# HSPR

*Promoting Zingiberales in  
Puerto Rico since 1996.*



*The Heliconia Society of Puerto Rico, Inc. was founded in 1996. The objectives of the society are to stimulate and promote the enjoyment and understanding of Heliconia and related plants of the order Zingiberales through education, research and communication, and to interact with the Heliconia Society International and other institutions which share similar interests, purposes or objectives.*

## President's Corner

It is with a great deal of pride and affection that we, the members of the Heliconia Society of Puerto Rico, dedicate this issue of our bulletin in honoring Kelly and Susan Brooks and Judy Nelson. It is rare that we, as individuals, have the opportunity to tell our "heroes", whom we admire so much, how much we appreciate what they have achieved with their lives and how much their contributions have enriched and brought beauty and new meaning into the lives of each of us.

In their early days of collecting heliconias and gingers from all parts of the New World, Kelly and Susan never ceased chasing and catching the elusive butterfly of beauty. They, in collaboration with Susan's best friend, Judy Nelson, have dedicated their entire lives to raising, propagating, and sharing with us their numerous species and varieties of heliconias and gingers from their farm. In giving us access to these plants, and sharing with us their knowledge of growing and propagating them, they have made all our lives much richer, more exciting, and more beautiful.

It is difficult to express adequately, to all three of these dearest friends, the depth of our gratitude and appreciation for what they have all contributed to all of our lives, except to say: "Kelly, Susan and Judy, we all thank you, as much as it is possible for us to do, for what you have accomplished with your lives and what you have shared with us. We all want you to remember that we will always love you and appreciate everything that you have done for us throughout your lifetimes of hard work, dedication and sharing. We will always remember all of you in deepest love and appreciation".

We are also indebted to Dr. José Abreu for his kindness and generosity in sharing his country home with us for our last meeting. We were sorry that Kelly Brooks was not able to attend and that Susan had to postpone giving the talk she had planned to share with us, in order to be with Kelly. We look

forward to hearing Susan's talk at a later date. Judy Nelson gave us an interesting preview about what we could expect from Susan's talk, when she is able to give it.

Sergio Tejedor also showed us some fantastic photos of many "new" heliconias from seed collected in the southern Caribbean Antilles. He and his wife Nancy also donated the proceeds from a special raffle in which they sold some seedlings of these new heliconias, to help in financing expenses for guest lecturers for our new "Meet the Experts" lecture series. The Tejedors, most generously, donated nearly \$500 as proceeds from this special raffle, to our society for this purpose. Our regular raffle was also enthusiastically enjoyed by everyone present.

Our December meeting will be held at the farm of Sergio and Nancy Tejedor in Jayuya, on the second Sunday in December. Please remember that we will also have elections for new officers at this meeting. These officers will be in charge of the society for the next two years. Come prepared to nominate your candidates.

The December meeting has historically been one of HSPR's best attended and most enjoyable meetings. We look forward to seeing all of you there.

Best Regards,  
Ray Jerome

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available seeds at [www.viveroanones.com](http://www.viveroanones.com).