

Cuba Garden Tour - 2023

by Tracey Kenning



As some of you may know three LHS members Roz Clayton, Michele Fisher and Tracey Kenning recently returned from a Cuba garden tour. We visited Varadero, Havana, Soroa, Cienfuegos, Trinidad, Codina Valley and Santa Clara. There is so much more to Cuba than beaches!!

Our first stop was to a cooperative garden in east Havana [Vivero Organopónico Alamar](#)



This is an organic community garden whereby members work and sell the produce to the community for a nominal fee. Most communities have an organic co-op garden. They sustain themselves by selling to the local

hospitality industry and providing free products to the local pregnant mothers' in return for not paying taxes. Tropical plants are also sold for a nominal charge to provide income. This cooperative is the epitome of recycling and reusing. We saw lots of everyday items being used as plant holders. Here they used a plastic bottle as a hanging basket and the guard of a fan guard of a fan filled with moss as a plant holder.

Everything is produced organically, they make their compost, charcoal for soil amendment and worm castings with California red wiggler worms all on-site. There is a mix of ages that work on the site from late teens to seniors, the production goes from seed to packaging and delivery. There is even a homeopathic clinic run by some of the elders advising on herbal remedies, all adding to the community.



Our next stop was Soroa and the Orchid garden [Orquiderio Soroa](#) in the Sierra del Rosario mountain range. The gardens were started by Spanish lawyer Thomas Felope Camacho between 1943-1953 in memory of his wife and daughter.

There are over 700 orchid species, 6,000 ornamentals and various grow/research facilities. Here is a picture of the **Microcycas calocoma palm** it is native to a small area in western Cuba and has been around since the dinosaurs but unfortunately is now critically endangered due to its low seedling output.



This bromeliad caught my eye, it's called painted fingers (*Neoregelia spectabilis*) because it looks like it has nail polish on the tips.

Another tree we saw cucumber tree (*Averrhoa bilimbi*) is a fruit-bearing tree with supposed medicinal properties after tasting one the saying "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" comes to mind, it is a very, very sour and as you can see does look like a small cucumber.

Below are some of the orchids we saw too many to name.



Did you know orchids are epiphytes that grow on other plants but are not parasitic along with ferns, bromeliads and air plants?



Along with orchids, there are multiple tropical plants like miniature pineapple, ornamental ginger, protea and close up of ginger flower



48 employees are working to propagate and maintain the gardens in shaded greenhouses as you can see from the picture





Next stop [Cienfuegos botanical garden](#) this was once a botanical and research centre for Harvard University. One very interesting tree we saw was the Rose of Venezuela (*Brownea grandiceps*) not only does it have

beautiful flowers but when the leaves first unfold, the drooping leaves are pale green with tiny pink and cream dots, but as they mature they become brownish-pink and eventually a uniform shade of green and the seed pods are



huge.



Another surprise was the Brazil nut tree (*Bertholletia excelsa*) it grows to a height of over 164ft tall one of the largest and long-lived trees, it may live for 500yrs or more. The fruit takes 14 months to mature after pollination of the flower. It has a hard woody shell 1/2in thick, which contains 8 to 24 wedge-shaped seeds (the nuts) packed like the



segments of an orange, but not limited to one whorl of segments. Up to three whorls can be stacked onto each other. The capsule contains a small hole at one end, which allows it to be opened. Monkeys are trained to run up the tree and insert their hands into the hole opening the capsule to retrieve the nuts, hence its common name monkey tree.

Who knew the brazil nuts we eat had such a fascinating life cycle?





Next on the list was Topes de Collantes in the Escambray mountains to a small farm called Codina. This is an ecological refuge where you can learn about nature with activities such as hiking, trekking,

birdwatching and horseback riding. We took a short eco-hike with a local guide pointing out local flowers and birds. The interesting part was getting there, they use old Russian military trucks I'm sure they have no suspension ☺ The main product in this region is coffee, the farmers sell 90% to the government and keep 10% to sell and trade themselves.



The green beans are the initial fruit turning yellow and finally red when they are ready to harvest and roast. A light roasting results in a light blend and a longer roast for a dark blend. The coffee we tried was very good. You can see from the picture beside on our drive to Codina is like a tropical rain forest full of ferns bromeliads and

lots of wild black-eyed susan vines and palm trees.

On our hike, we saw lots of different hibiscuses and bromeliads growing everywhere, even a cactus *Rhipsalis paradoxa* growing on the trees.



The final picture I'll leave you with is the humble banana, who knew they had such a beautiful flower, isn't nature wonderful?

