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O n t h e
C o v e r : The area near Stillwater Dam is a scenic spot in the upper McBryde
Garden. Its rich and varied collections contain some amazing plants that
are just waiting to be discovered. (See story on page 10.)

Photo by Jon Letman

Hidden in plain sight



by Jon Letman, Associate Editor

One of the best things about NTBG's five garden sites is that no matter how many times you visit, there is always more to see. This is certainly true of McBryde Garden. Situated in the middle and upper portions of the Lāwa'ī Valley, NTBG's oldest garden extends from the Pump Six area, replete with variations in topography, elevation, foliage, canopy cover, flowing water, vistas, and the living collections themselves.

A visit to one part of McBryde Garden on a sun-filled summer day and another visit to a different part of the garden on a blustery winter afternoon presents an entirely different face, evoking a range of emotions.

McBryde Garden encompasses some 200 acres in the valley, with another roughly 50 acres designated as the Lāwa'ī Preserve. Walking paths for self-guided tours currently meander through 25 acres in the upper valley. Some parts of these are less frequented than others, yet are just as exciting and filled with remarkable plants.

One such section is along the west bank of Lāwa'ī Stream between the stairs leading down to the Bamboo Bridge area and the broad, open expanse known as Big Valley.

This stretch of trail, folded against a steep slope leading to the upper valley and somewhat hidden from view, illustrates how some of the McBryde's most amazing plants can be hidden in plain sight.

From plants commonly seen in Hawai'i like the dense wall of hau (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*) and introduced ornamental pink ginger to the garden's very first specimen of a native plant so rare that the Hawaiian name has been lost to time (*Polyscias racemosa*) to *Pritchardia munroi*, a palm native to Moloka'i and almost extinct in the wild, taking this short walk is like discovering a treasure chest you've had for years but never took the time to open.

Some of these plants have been assembled by NTBG scientists while on collecting trips or conducting surveys on Pacific islands like Samoa, Tonga, Tahiti, and the Caroline Islands. Others come from the Mascarenes, Malawi, Argentina, Thailand, the Lesser Antilles, India, China, or dozens of other places around the globe.

Anchored in the earth, climbing upon trees and rocks or growing from the waters of Lāwa'i Stream, every plant offers tangible qualities such as beautiful colors and forms, pleasant smells and tastes, useful extracts and materials, healing properties, edible fruits, or something as simple as cool shade or a sense of calm. These plants also represent something greater than themselves, for in their natural habitat each is part of a complex and fragile ecosystem.

One of the most prominent trees along this walk are Tahitian chestnuts (*Inocarpus fagifer*) which line both banks of the stream. A number of these trees were gathered from a botanical garden in Tahiti by Research Biologist Steve Perlman while on a breadfruit collecting trip in 1977, during which he visited seven islands in six weeks. Along the way he gathered the fruits known as mape (mah-pay) in Tahiti, where they are widely eaten boiled, roasted, or as bread.

Another plant found thousands of miles to the west, on Palau, is hanguana¹ ('bakong rimba' in Malaysia) collected in a swamp by

¹ *Hanguana malayana*



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- ▲ Stairs descend to the banks of Lāwa'i Stream. *Photos by author*
 - ▼ The spike-covered trunk of the black palm (*Astrocaryum standleyanum*)
 - ▶ Tahitian chestnut trees (*Inocarpus fagifer*) provide shade and color.
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Herbarium Collections Manager Tim Flynn. The plant grows as a perennial rhizomatous herb which produces clusters of long, bright green blade-like leaves. It is well adapted to moist areas like the trail beside Lāwa‘i Stream and does not immediately stand out as unusual or extraordinary, so some might ask “why collect it?”

“It wasn’t a plant I was familiar with and one that was probably not commonly cultivated. By collecting plants from other areas and growing them here, they become more accessible to researchers.” Flynn says.

Science Director Dr. David Lorence, who was with Flynn at the time adds, “there is value in increasing the diversity of our living collection by adding something not collected before. We’ve already fulfilled several research requests for hanguana.”

Certainly this is true of the rare native Hawaiian *Pritchardia* palms, the African *Erythrina livingstoniana* or the *Typhonodorum lindleyanum*, a monotypic¹ genus of gargantuan upright aroid native to Madagascar collected by Dr. Lorence on Mauritius in the 1970s.

In its efforts to broaden its tropical world collections, NTBG has gathered some of the world’s most important and iconic plants which can simply go unnoticed in this area of McBryde: the heavy club-like inflorescence of *Tapeionochilos* sp., a sharp-tipped, villainous-looking *Costus* relative from Papua New Guinea; the enormous *Grammatophyllum* ‘tiger’ orchids; towering *Heliconia solomonensis* with wing-like leaves taller than a grown man; the West African miracle fruit (*Synsepalum dulcificum*) that makes sour tastes sweet; and *Lawsonia inermis*, the source of henna which, in powder form, is used to dye hair, beards, hands, and feet from North Africa to India.

¹ a genus containing only one species



▲ The Lāwa'i Stream once again begins its tranquil flow below Stillwater Dam.

Walk further along this trail and the garden reveals edible ferns, patches of colorful ginger, stream-side boulders encased in ficus roots, and always the soothing sound of Lāwa‘i Stream, punctuated occasionally by the whoops and cries of the ‘auku‘u (black-crowned night heron) and ‘alae‘ula (native Hawaiian gallinule).

Eventually the trail emerges along the shady streambank dotted with Pacific and Indian Ocean palms mixed with large shade and fruit trees. In this quiet, cool corner of the garden grow botanical curiosities such as the prickly bunya pine (*Araucaria bidwillii*), the pink-blossomed *Brachychiton bidwillii*, and the soaring Queensland kauri tree (*Agathis robusta*), all three native to Australia.

Herein lies one of the attractions of NTBG’s gardens – vast and ever-growing living collections. Some of the Garden’s plants are well-known to the point of celebrity, drawing people great distances just to see them in person. Others, however, grow quietly with lesser recognition of their presence, but awaiting discovery, or rediscovery, tucked out of sight, if only barely so.

A garden requires patient labor and attention. Plants do not grow merely to satisfy ambitions or to fulfill good intentions. They thrive because someone expended effort on them.



— Liberty Hyde Bailey

This piece was just one of the articles featured in the print magazine
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