Flowers and eco-tourism

Marc, Marengo, tropicals, and alpaeneas

● *Marengo and freshly cut red and pink alpenia purpurata*

Hanging on a hillside at Les Canelles in the Anse Royale district is a little garden rich in exotic flowers the tourism trade loves. It is productive, a true model for a thriving eco-tourism development in the district.

The well-kept garden of anthuriums, haelaeconias, bourgaena, rattlesnake, cigar and several other species of tropical flowers is the initiative of former Seychelles ambassador Marc Marengo. He has turned a past-time into a productive activity which today sells flowers to hotels, offices and makes floral arrangements for special occasions. Ferns, ornamentals, grow profusely higher up on the hillside, at the back of the family houses.

"I've always loved gardening, from the time I was a child," Marengo, who is the special adviser in the Vice-President's Office, told *Isola Bella.*

He said life to him "is about light, colours and varieties". Gardening is the best way to express his views of life, he added.

"When I see a flower starts budding, opening and people admiring it, I feel contented. I tell myself that I produced this beautiful flower," said Marengo.

He spent a total of 16 years overseas - two years in Paris and 14 years as Seychelles representative at the United Nations in New York, United States of America. He traveled to many other countries, including Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia and Hawaii where he was attracted to exotic tropical flowers growing in these places.

"I was always fascinated with what they do with tropicals in these countries. You find nice floral arrangements in the lobbies and public areas. I told myself it would be great for Seychelles to produce flowers that needed not changing everyday," he recounted to *Isola Bella.*

A rose costing between R10-R15 is dead overnight, according to Marengo, but the tropicals he grows last between one and four weeks.

"The tropicals are exotic, long-lasting, real value for money," he noted.

He does not cultivate roses on the family property, every inch of which is covered in exotic flowers.

Some of the flowers Marengo grows are collectors' items in Seychelles. He grows a total of 54 varieties. No other people have these tropicals in Seychelles, but he would not say what he alone has in his garden.

"When I started most of the plants did not exist here. Varieties such as torch ginger, alpaenea, red lobster claws and parrot's beak were already common in Seychelles when I launched the project," he said.

He carries around his own colourful book on exotic tropical flowers. The flowers he prefers are the Indonesia wax ginger and sexy pink.

● *Indonesian wax ginger*

● *Okinawa torch*

"Haelaeconia alone has 350 varieties," he said, as if to prove his knowledge of flowers.

At the end of August he ordered new plants from South America to propagate in his Les Canelles garden. He said countries like Columbia, Brazil and Ecuador have the same climate like Seychelles, which makes it easy to grow the plants here.

Marengo invested plenty of money to fence the property, tap underground water, build reservoirs, install pumps and erect shade houses for nurseries. The property also produces manure and compost to keep the soil rich for the high-value plants. The property was previously used to grow lerouy (known as taro in the Pacific) but when diseases attacked this crop nationwide, he turned to cultivating exotic flowers.

Marengo is happy with the financial returns from the venture. He said the tropicals he grows were always in demand because of their elegance, sparkling colours, nice shapes and durability. It is difficult at times to satisfy demands for the flowers.

The busy office worker lives in Victoria in a small apartment five days a week. At the weekend his life revolves around flowers. He rushes home at Les Canelles every Friday evening to tend his garden and be with his pets.

"The feeling is therapeutic when I am home in my garden. I feel so good," he said of his passion for gardening and growing flowers.

When he is at work in Victoria, it is sister Winsell Marengo Tolfree who gives the flowers the tender care the precious plants deserve.

● *Sister Winselle in the garden*

Marc Marengo is of tourism background, having worked in hotels after he left school in the mid-70s. He serves on the Anse Royale eco-tourism committee, the first and only such district committee in the country. Anse Royale was chosen for the pilot eco-tourism project.

He is leading by example. His exotic garden project, he said, is a way to make maximum use of land around the house and sell the flowers to tourism and business establishments. It provides employment and a good source of revenue.

"When I am short of alpaenea, I buy from the community to meet orders. I am spreading the benefit of eco-tourism," he said.

● *Mother Marie, known affectionately as Manya, who passed away two years ago at the age of 88, helped his son develop the garden*

● *Heliconia bihai richmond red*

● *Calathea luthea, cigar flower*

● *Giant yellow heliconia yellow caribaea*

● *Torch ginger pink*

● *Calypso anthurium*

● *Heliconia rostrata Hanging lobster claw*

● *Torch ginger white*

● *Musa velutina self-peeling banana*

Making rain in times of drought

A plan to summon rain out of a cloudless sky by painting the ground black could be tested this year in Israel's Negev desert.

Scientists hope the technique will banish drought and turn deserts green.

But it is unlikely to be of help in Seychelles, which traditionally experiences drought during the months of July, August and September.

Seychelles just does not have the large areas of countryside to be covered in a black thermal material similar to lightweight tarmac. In a full-scale system, panels of the special radiating material would be laid over several square kilometres of land.

Computer simulations have shown that heated air rising from the panels will cause water vapour to condense into clouds and fall as rain.

Researchers behind the Geshem Project, named after the Hebrew word for rain, believe manipulating air currents in this way can overcome droughts in sub-tropical regions which dry up in the spring and summer.

Project leader Professor Leon Brenig, from the University of Brussels, said: "It will make a huge difference. In a region where there is 150mm (of rain) a year it would go up to 600-700mm a year."

The scientists estimate that crop yields for a given area would be boosted by 40%.

Parts of the world that could benefit most include north-eastern Brazil, north Africa, the Kalahari and Sahara deserts and south-eastern Spain.