

Richard Eggenberger, "A Lifetime with Plumeria"

Delivered to Southern California Plumeria Society on 9.25.2005
Transcribed by Plumerias.com

[Opens book]

Then Spring, an ardent lover, leaped through leaves
And caught the earth-bride in his eager clasp;
His advent was a fire of irised hues,
His arms were a circle of the arrival of joy.
His voice was a call to the Transcendent's sphere
Whose secret touch upon our mortal lives
Keeps ever new the thrill that made the world.



Opening with Savitri

[Turns page]

Pure like the breath of an unstained desire
White jasmines haunted the enamoured air,
Pale mango-blossoms fed the liquid voice
Of the love-maddened coil, and the brown bee
Muttered in fragrance mid the honey-buds.
The sunlight was a great god's golden smile.
All Nature was at beauty's festival.

[Sets book down]

We are at beauty's festival. Look around you, at these magnificent flowers that we all love so deeply and look around you at your neighbors and friends with whom you have worked so diligently and in such close harmony. The only society I have seen where I have not met dozens of divergent factions, but instead working together to beautify this earth through their love of flowers.

I am only a servant in this great effort. And as a servant I will do all I can to assist you, because we are only at the threshold of what will come with plumerias. And there will be new dwarf forms with large flowers, new fragrances. There will be new colors. We have lavender already coming into the genetic pool and there will be purples in time. There will be flowers that will be much longer lasting. Eventually, somebody will splice a cold, hearty gene into plumeria. It is already being done in so many areas already.



Lavender Plumerias

Why one does choose a particular flower that seems to speak so deeply to the soul? Look at all of you who have chosen this plumeria, this frangipani, this group of antlers with flowers sticking out of the top.

In Auroville, where I work much of the year, we are designing a series of 12 gardens at the center of the city. It is planned to be a city of 50,000, and the first city to be built with the concept of human unity as its basis. Therefore, I welcome all of you and I hope that in the coming years you can make visits to the gardens in India, in Thailand, in Sri Lanka, in Singapore.

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And I hope for more than this. I hope that your society will be the one that we can work with me to develop a book that will contain the most beautiful 100 cultivars of Plumerias around the world. This has not been even attempted yet and it will be welcomed by the entire world. We may have to have photographs from other countries to see how a plant does in Asia versus to how it performs in San Diego. There are differences. Plumeria obtusa, the dwarf obtusa that we have in India, grows about 2-feet tall and is covered in blooms, and I'm told that here it doesn't do anything like that.

So, we would like to get your opinion. We've written two sheets here, to list your 10 favorite plumerias, and then to assess what you feel is most important in selecting a plumeria. Is it color? Is it fragrance? Is it the shape of the plant or the prolific ness of its bloom? What is most important to you? listing down 1-11. So after this brief talk, perhaps you can fill in those sheets and that will be a database for the society to go further in evaluating the top plants, how they're grown, cultural requirements, what kind of soil we use.



The Handbook on Plumeria Culture was a beginning, but we are still at the beginning. There is so much beauty coming out. Look at the new flowers that just occurred in the last couple of years. It's extraordinary!

And I will begin a breeding program, a selective breeding program in India and I have an excellent person to do it. It's not easy with plumerias! With any flower you have to emasculate the pollen, close the flower with a bag, open it again when the flower is receptive, place new pollen on, bag it, and label it, everything... But, until now, or and least to my knowledge, no one has done this. And if anyone has, I would *really* like to hear about it because it is extremely important.

I know, I met Bill Moragne's daughter, and of course I've met the people in Hawaii, and in Thailand, and all of our hybrids today are chance hybrids. Maybe two great flowers were in proximity, and maybe an insect came and pollenated it and we took a seedpod and said maybe this will be a good one, and we grew a 100 seeds. And out of that 100 seeds, 1, possibly 1, superior plant came. And what do we do with the dogs? We fill the yard with them!

No, no, no..., that's not the way. We have to continually reach higher and higher and higher and find the criteria as to what is the best. Hence the beginning, it's only the beginning, much more will come.

You folks are the biggest society I know of. I was Past President of The Plumeria Society America, and I was made a Life Member. But you people made me a life member along with my wife, before she passed away, and I am forever grateful for that honor, that privilege, to be amongst you today.

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I don't want to talk too long. Because I'd like to answer questions and go amongst you and perhaps you have something to ask and it might be a lot more interesting than me just standing up here. So...

[Yes, I have a question, I noticed in the Matrimandir Gardens the 12th garden is the Frangipani, the garden of psychological perfection. I'm curious, how you guys came to that, how that procured?]

Oh you ask such a deep question...

['What was the question?']

The question was, at the Matrimandir Gardens, the 12th garden, and last garden, is the Garden of Perfection, and the Plumeria symbolizes perfection. These gardens were named by the Mother who was, at that time, about 90 years old. The greatest spiritual teacher I have ever met. And she had the vision of Auroville as a place that no nation could call its own, where no one religion or sect would be dominant over another, where everyone would be welcome if they had good will and an aspiration to better this world, and to participate in this great experiment of human unity.



The Matrimandir

The Matrimandir itself is this extraordinary structure, and you can see it on websites, there are a lot of websites devoted to Auroville. The Matrimandir is the golden dome with golden discs that just radiates in the sun of South India. It is a place where one goes into an inner room after walking up this wonderful incline, that's like a spiral, and the room is a large room with 12 alabaster pillars, pure white carpet, and in the center of the room, the largest crystal ever built by man, from Zeiss, in Germany, and on that crystal falls one ray of light, day and night. And one goes in there to find one's soul, to see who we are, behind all of this; these shirts, these haircuts..., who we are within. And it's open to everyone, but one has to have an aspiration to make the search.



Center Crystal from
Zeiss, Germany



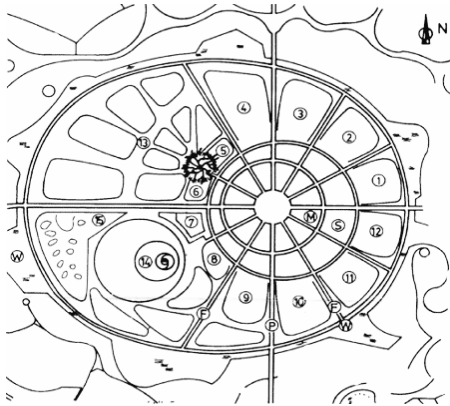
Mirra Alfassa,
Mother

And Mother told me, about The Gardens, "It must be a thing of great beauty. Of such a beauty, that when men enter, they will say, 'AH! This is it!' And they will experience physically and concretely the significance of each garden. In the Garden of Youth they will know youth. In the Garden of Bliss they will know bliss,..." and so forth. And then mother raised her hand and said, "One must know how to move from consciousness to consciousness," and then she gave the names of the 12 gardens.

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Map of the Matrimandir Gardens

She said the first garden would be the garden of existence, obviously our beginnings, the next garden, the Garden of Consciousness and then the Garden of Bliss, followed by a garden of Life, a garden of Light, and a garden of Power. Then a garden of Wealth, represented by water lilies and cactus, then a garden of Usefulness then a garden of Progress, and finally the last three gardens; Youth, Harmony and Perfection. And she chose the Plumeria to represent the garden of perfection. And when I began working with plumerias, I knew it was my flower. It was the flower that I would work with for the rest of my life... I also work with a 1000 other flowers.

All have their importance in my life. Because every flower has a message; every flower can uplift us and enlighten us, can bring joy where there is sadness, bring light where there is darkness. And the deeper we go into flowers the more we understand that, and not with the mind, but with our heart. And all of you who grow these flowers are in that atmosphere of perfection. And whether you are conscious of it or not, you are striving towards perfection.

I'll go around now and answer your questions...

Any question. About any subject...

[Do you gather cuttings, or do grow your own seedlings?]

Ah, you ask a wonderful question. I am delighted to answer it.

Mary Helen and I traveled all around the world collecting plumerias. Every place we went; Hawaii, Singapore, Thailand, Sri Lanka, the U.S., because I was a close friend of Elizabeth Thornton in Houston, every door was open to us for the work of the Auroville and The Matrimandir. At times we would come with one or two hundred of pounds of cuttings, traveling all night and all day and the next night and the next day on a nasty, dirty, Indian train to get back to Auroville and plant the plumeria cuttings. This was the basis of our collection. From that, Dr. Criley sent me a lot of rare things. Other people sent me a lot of cuttings. And then as all of these bloomed, I selected out the best and put them in close proximity, studying species as well as cultivars. Then selected the best seedlings that I could.

I've told my friends here that Luther Burbank could go down a row of 10,000 plum seedlings and pick out the two that were superior. I don't claim that.

But, I was fortunate in finding many that were fantastic. And we were hoping to show you a whole Power Point presentation with a computer, but we don't have the computer today so, we'll get to it and I'll get these sent to you so that you can do it in future meetings.

Alright what's the next step; well I've already mentioned breeding. But there are still plumerias that are being found around the world that don't have a name; that someone

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has grown and just said, well, that's my mother's plant. And all of you are going around and finding these things and you've been collecting them. And this is our gene pool of the future. This is what is going to create the great, new plumerias; huge sizes, great petal substance, lasting for 7 or 8 days when plucked, compact plants that anyone can grow in a pot, etc. So yes, we've collected from all over the world and I will continue to do so now. In fact many of your members have offered me their very best for the Matrimandir Gardens.

[Oh, so you're still planting it over there?]

Still working, I started in 1969. But you all know this is not a one week's job, growing plumerias. And I think some of you probably have watered 5 or 6 hours a day also, and you know what that is like. And in Houston, we had to take everything in in the winter because the temperature could go down to 19 degrees or 15 degrees and everything melted. So we'd strip the leaves, shake the soil off the roots, put some newspaper around them, put the root system in a plastic bag, and carried them up into the attic or into a storeroom, if we were fortunate to have an empty storeroom. I know that Elizabeth used to do this when she was already in her late 60's, early 70's. She'd put hundreds of plants in a little greenhouse and have a heater going all the time because there could be weeks and weeks of freezing weather, hence, the cold tolerant gene that we have to find, because people all around the world want to grow plumerias.

Mary Helen and I, when we had the Plumeria People, sold so many plumerias in Alaska. Well, they do have a long sun season, and then they have a long winter season. And they would put them in sunrooms during the winter. And of course when the summer was there, when you had 22 hours a day of sun, and we had to close the blinds so we could sleep; the plumerias got plenty of sunlight! They were very, very happy, and people would write to us about how well they grew.



Mary Helen and Richard
Eggenberger

Now there are more studies, recent studies, on fertilizers. And I should cover that for a moment. You know the fertilizer manufacturers such as Peter's recommend for Orchids, whether it's a tablespoon or a teaspoon I don't remember, a teaspoon per gallon every two weeks. And in Thailand, when we were there in 1977, the Orchid growers said, "What would happen if we divided that by 1/14 and gave a little bit everyday?" And suddenly the orchids burst into blooms and they were sending two plane loads of cut flower to Europe a day. And you've seen the results. You know..., buffets are nice...

But if you have a buffet once a week and you starve yourself for 6 days it's not quite as interesting as when you can get three square meals a day and the plants understand that. Next question?

[Why do some plumeria have no fragrance?]

Why do some *roses* have no fragrance?

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You see, you obviously love fragrance. And we asked the Mother that question, what is the difference in flowers that are fragrant and not fragrant? And she very simply said, "Fragrant flowers offer themselves more."

So, fragrance is a very important thing in plumerias. For years rose hybridizers went for color and size and they bred out the fragrance and we have these perfect roses without fragrance. Now it's turning around again, now we are getting back into fragrance, because all of these aspects have to be considered. So it is a very good question.

Some of them don't have fragrance, or some of them may have fragrance in one part of the world and not in another. Oleanders in India are intensely fragrant, sweet delicious fragrances, and when I talk to The Oleander Society in Galveston they say, "None of our Oleander has fragrances and we have hundreds of varieties."

So, we have to find the mechanisms, the genetic mechanisms that bring the most wonderful fragrances into our plants, and work towards fragrance as we work towards substance and color.

[How successful have you been on cross-breeding?]

I am only beginning the program this year. I leave in about a month for India and I have a very good breeder. Actually, with plumerias, you know it's complicated. You have to slit the tube, the pollen is underneath. You have to get underneath to get it out and it really needs, and I have one, a jeweler's head lamp with a magnifying glass. Then you can really see inside. And I'd like all of you to experiment with this. Because one of you is going to have the green thumb and you're going to have the touch and you're going to be able to do it. And then you will know the parent plant and the pod plant, or to be less specific, the mother and father and you can say this is a cross of such and such. We don't have that yet in our history of our plumerias studies and we need to have it. Next question?

[Have you guys done any studies on the importance of micronutrients to the Plumeria and any specific micronutrient that might be lacking that would be helpful perhaps for cold heartiness?]

Not in terms of cold heartiness, but we know that ammonium sulfate, magnesium, of course phosphoric acid is one of the main ingredients. And Plumerias are heavy eaters; one should never think that they aren't. They respond very well. But if you give them just nitrogen, you push growth at the expense of bloom. So, Ken Ames, Carl and I'm sure many other of you have already formulated very good systems, and this should all be documented and available to all the members of society so that someone will come up with something else. Maybe it is just one micronutrient that triggers something that we don't know about as yet. And I think that's a very worth while work.

[...Specifically they've been talking about Nickel might be an absent nutrient. Because none of the fertilizer companies use nickel and we're on a program of continuous feeding using that nickel to see if that does help in the winter time with black tip fungus and the after effects on the frost of the tips.]

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Have you noticed anything?

[We just started the program this year, so we'll see.]

Will you track it?

[Yes.]

And also track whether it has an effect on flower color, or fragrance, or prolific ness in bloom I would say these are all factors that should be considered. So you have the same plant with and without. We must do it on the exact same plant; it can't be a seedling of something. So if you have a Samoan Fluff you treat then you have a Samoan Fluff that you don't treat.

Of course now quantum physicists tell us that there is no double-blind study. That our consciousness has an effect on exactly what the plant does. But we won't get into that right now.

Yes, with the bouquet.

[Holds up crested Plumeria, 'What happened there?']



We have seen that often, very often and I've seen at times that it was replicated with chemicals I've seen also insects that have done this and created multiple breaks and seedlings treated with gibberelic acid or other controls that also have the same effect. These crested branches need a lot more study and especially seedlings that we could get to branch early and perhaps induce dwarfism. I'm not saying chemically it's necessary it could be genetically also,

To go on a bit with dwarfing, there are some new dwarfs on the market. Now I have not been impressed with the flowers very much. Mary Helen and I first introduced the dwarf pink Singapore. We found it in a little church yard in Hawaii and shipped back many, many cuttings. And you know it blooms nicely and I would say that Roland has one of the nicest plants that I've seen, but it isn't a spectacular flower. I mean we have to agree with that. Now if we could get one of these flowers onto that dwarf plant. Then, we're doing something.

So there's something we have to work, to really try to continue to improve on compactness of plants. Because these things that are 10-feet tall and have a few flowers on the top, they're not all that exciting. Oh, If you like climbing ladders and looking down on top of them that's all right.

But in Singapore, how many of you have been to the gardens in Singapore? One two three. Do you remember walking on that high rise and looking down on the flowers was a totally different view of plumerias. To look down upon a sea of blossoms was a wonderful experience. And we can do the same thing with dwarf plants. Anyone else?

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[When you find a seedling that you think is exceptional, how do you start producing it? What is the best method?]

If you find a seedling that flowers and is exceptional, and we have all the criteria here on sheets that you can fill it in and it meets on a scale of 1 to 10 the highest of those criteria, then I would say the best way is by grafting. Take a good root stock and graft the plant it so that you're assured that this plant will be continued.

And one of saddest things is when people say, "Oh I have a great plant and I won't give a cutting of it." Because I've seen wonderful, wonderful plants disappear because someone didn't share and the plant died. Where it could have been continued, by giving it to a few people, they could have gotten back too. Let's all always think of that first of all, above all things. But that is what I felt with members here; this feeling of sharing, of deeper communication, of an aspiration to grow more perfect plants, more beautiful plants and to take delight in sharing with others. Do you have another question? Oh gosh, many...



[Richard, what's your favorite?]

The one I'm looking at at the moment.

[In your Handbook in the Section on pests and diseases you talk about Black tip, you listed a fungicide called Benemyl and I can't find that in California anymore and I was wondering if you had any updated advice.]

....20 something years ago. I think people here probably know better than I. But I would say that one could try something very simple like Copper Sulfate and lime, the old [Bordeaux Mix](#) used to take care of all kinds of fungal problems. We don't see it much anymore but I would make it. I would start experimenting with this. This is an important question.



We also have a beautiful display stand that Carl makes and he showed me his technique which is wonderful. This is another area, how to display plumerias. In Hawaii we have the leis and we have many different types of string leis which I hope you will learn here; these extraordinary methods, of whether you go through the tube or whether you go sideways through the tube, or vertically through the tube, and whether or not you display them as a floral display. There is so much that one can do.

You will see in the Plumeria book this lady who had the lei with over 1800 flowers like I've never seen anything like it, all open like that, almost like feathers. It was so beautiful. Just extraordinary!



Plumeria Lei on page
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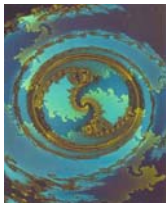
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[Have you encountered pathogens anywhere around the world that can strike plumerias? I'm thinking of the glossy winged sharp shooter, a big pest to Oleander, and there are some many around here. Are there pathogens out there that we haven't seen yet that will become a bigger problem here?]

Well this is a big study going on in The Oleander Society here because they also have this blight that is wiping out all these plants were all in America.

In India, I had Oleanders, big oleanders. You would not believe this. There was an insect that cut like a beaver. It would a cut a V all around that stem, and in the morning you'd come and these huge stems would be lying on the ground. This is supposed to be one of the most poisonous plants in the world but obviously it was not to that beetle. And there are other problems we have encountered or we've seen in other parts of the world in the Apocynaceae family, because it is a wide family.

Catharanthus roseus, or the Periwinkle or Vinka, for a long time it was felt that it has great properties, anti-cancer properties. And so they contracted with Indian growers to grow acres and acres, hundreds of acres of *Catharanthus*. Well, the roots of eggplant look just the same. And so these farmers sent the first group of *Catharanthus* and then they followed it up with plane loads of eggplant. Well any scientist can tell you right away. So they stopped the whole program.



Gaia Theory
Illustration

These kinds of research, especially organic controls are your most important avenue of exploration. We are living on a planet. Oh gosh, I can't preach but, well you know what is happening. You know the destruction that mankind has reaped in so many areas of this world with the cutting of rain forests etc.

On the other hand, the Gaia Theory says that the earth will heal itself even if it has to be at the expense of man. I believe in that theory. Because the earth, as the poet Sri Aurobindo, whom I read you a passage...

[Opens book again]

The earth is the spirit's manifest to home
And the place for the eventual realization of a life divine.

[Closes book]



Sri Aurobindo

We may not all agree with that. But I do think that most of us would agree that the earth is sacred. And we have to do everything we can to purify it once again, through our flowers and through the love that we communicate through these flowers. Again I thank you for honoring me with a life membership.

I will work with you. You can be assured of that. Friends have my email. I will always answer your questions. We will try and get the best cultivars here, from other parts of the world, as they're already starting to do from Thailand. And things will become more and more beautiful because of you.