

*Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian*

## Joy to the world!

By Cynthia Brian

*"Only those who go where few have gone can see what few have seen." ~ Buddha*



*Christmas delight at Cynthia's fire chief nephew's home. Merry Christmas!*

**D**id you know that poinsettias grow into trees? Or that mother's tongue, also known as snake plant, is an excellent fence barrier? Without a thought from whence a plant derives, most of us buy our indoor plants at nurseries, grocery stores, and big-box centers. Our holiday décor includes colorful tropical specimens that thrive inside.

On a quest to discover the flora and fauna that bring joy to our world, I traveled to Cuba with a program in support of the Cuban people. Throughout my journey, the diverse and unique landscape constantly changed as our small group of six plus an informative Cuban guide hiked through nature reserves, parks, rainforests, and into the magnificent Escambray Mountains. In 1492 Christopher Columbus landed in Cuba, describing it as "the most beautiful land that human eyes had ever seen." Supporting 7,500 species of flowering plants, with more

than 53 percent being endemic, Cuba is a garden lovers paradise.

The rivers, grottos, caves and waterfalls were dotted with gigantic tree ferns, indigenous species of orchids, tillandsias (air plants), bromeliads and palms as well as banana, mango, papaya, orange and grapefruit trees. Philodendrons twined up 50-foot trees and Ixora commonly called jungle flame or jungle geranium, firespike and ginger flanked the narrow footpaths. Fields of sugar cane, coffee plants and tobacco straddled the lowlands and hillsides. We traversed log bridges over rushing rivers in Topas de Collantes and were mesmerized by the delicate mimosas. Their leaves instantly closed with the touch of a finger. We tiptoed on rocks crossing trickling streams and swam in the poceta de cristal or crystal pond under a waterfall near the top of the mountain. A sign on the tree read *salto los desparramaderos*: translated means

"jump the scatters." Chuckling, we jumped numerous "scatters." Tall thick spires of bamboo led to the mouth of the river where rocky stalactites hung from the ceiling of caves and the rocky formations of stalagmites rose from the cavern floor.

We were fortunate enough to witness the unique Cuban national bird, the trogan tocororo, sitting on a limb in the forest. Its striking feathers are red, white and blue, reflecting those of the national flag. It is said that this endemic bird found only in Cuba will die of sadness in captivity, symbolizing the desire of the people to always be free. It was called *guatini* by the Taino Indians and is also known as the onomatopoeic *tooloro* because of its song. At lunch one day under a thatched canopy, we met the largest endemic land mammal in Cuba, the friendly and curious social rodent, the Cuban Hutia. Prized as a rare delicacy, it lives in trees and is almost extinct because of over-harvesting. We stopped at a lunch hut in the Zapata Swamp another afternoon but didn't see any Cuban crocodiles, an endangered species found exclusively in Cuba. ... continued on next Page



*Firespike, *odononema strictum*, attracts hummingbirds and beneficial insects.*