



Your Holiday In Full Flower

Caribbean blooms create local colour.

By Antony Bolante

Picture your Caribbean paradise. Sunlight warms you as a gentle ocean breeze restores equilibrium. Crystalline blue waters caress a pristine beach. Moving inland, the dazzling white sand yields to a lush green. And then there are flowers. Of course there are flowers: they epitomise the tropics' seemingly eternal springtime. They are the symbol and sign of nature's exuberance, adorning the landscape with splashes of red, yellow, orange, pink, blue. Without the flowers, it's an incomplete paradise.

Fortunately, you'll find lush parks and botanical gardens throughout the Caribbean.

Barbados is notable for its dual offerings: the Andromeda Botanic Gardens and the Flower ForeSt Overlooking Barbados' beautiful coast, the 6-acre Andromeda Botanic Gardens hosts over 600 plant species as well as research and educational activities. Paths in the Flower Forest also lead to breathtaking views of Barbados at 750 feet above sea level. It devotes 7 acres of a nearly 54-acre reserve to a wild garden, thick with the plants and flowers of the Caribbean.

In terms of sheer size, Curaçao's Christoffel Park is unmatched. It extends over 4,500 acres, encompassing a rich variety of fauna and flora. Christoffel Park is also home to the historic Savonet Museum, located in a former plantation house.

St Vincent and the Grenadines Botanic Gardens may not be the largest, but it's among the oldest gardens — not just

in the Caribbean, but in the entire Western Hemisphere.

Since 1765, this 20-acre Eden has not only helped to conserve St Vincent's rarest species of plants, but also its national bird, the St Vincent Parrot.

On the British Virgin Island of Tortola, the 4-acre J.R. O'Neal Botanic Gardens offers a peaceful retreat among the Caribbean's lush flora. The Diamond Botanical Gardens in the Windward Islands' St Lucia are smaller, but are situated near underground sulphurous hot springs that feed therapeutic mineral baths as well as the picturesque Diamond Falls.

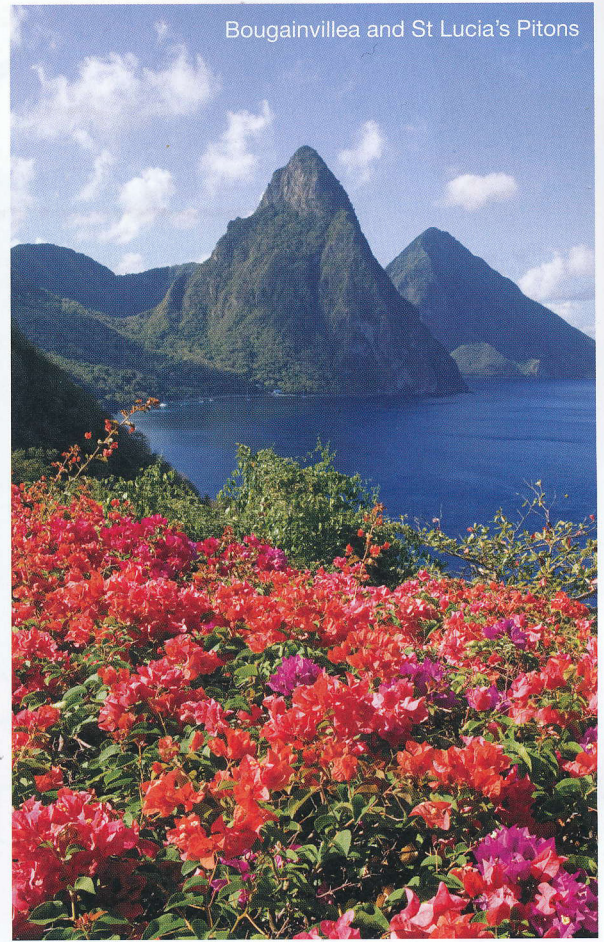
Naturally, you need not visit official botanical gardens to enjoy the Caribbean's colourful flora. The balmy climate ensures the islands are always blooming with spectacular flowers both native and naturalised. Whether you hike Dominica's challenging Waitukubuli National Trail or simply wander a quaint town in the Leeward Islands, beautiful blooms are sure to catch your eye. Here's just a sample of the breathtaking flowers you're bound to encounter.

Allamanda

Named for a Swiss botanist, the allamanda produces large 5-petaled flowers in vivid yellow, white, and purple. You won't have to visit a botanical garden to find the allamanda flower. Robust and fast growing, it thrives wherever the sun is abundant and the soil is moist — in other words, throughout the Caribbean.



Pride of Barbados



Bougainvillea and St Lucia's Pitons

Pride of Barbados

Its proper name is *Caesalpinia pulcherrima*, but its common names include poinciana, peacock flower, red bird-of-paradise, and flamboyant-de-jardin. But “pride of Barbados” is both more memorable and more befitting this beautiful flower. After all, it is the national flower of Barbados and appears on its coat of arms. The pride of Barbados is even emblazoned on the Queen’s Personal Barbadian Flag, used exclusively by Queen Elizabeth II when acting in her role as monarch of Barbados. The pride of Barbados can grow to a height of over 4 metres, but it is often pruned into hedgerows seemingly ablaze with incandescent flowers. Arranged into virtual bouquets (by pyramidal structures called *racemes*), each flower boasts red petals fringed in yellow. Long stamens emanate from their centre, like trails of sparks from an exploding firework.

Bird-of-paradise

Though native to South Africa, both the name and appearance of the bird-of-paradise evokes the tropics like no other flower. The proper name for the genus is *Strelitzia*, named for the duchy Mecklenburg-Strelitz, birthplace of Queen Charlotte, the wife of King George III of the United Kingdom. The name “bird-of-

paradise” encompasses several species: the giant bird-of-paradise grows into a majestic fan, while other species are more modest in scale. However, all possess the characteristic flower said to resemble the plumage of its namesake, a bird native to — oddly enough — distant New Guinea. Petals spring from a horizontal leaf-like shaft, or *spathe*, like a feathered crown of brilliant orange and blue, or, in related species, a stunning white.

Bougainvillea

Native to South America, the bougainvillea thrives in any warm climate, especially equatorial regions. They bloom year-round provided there’s no dry season. The botanist Philibert Commerçon named this colourful, hardy vine after the French navy admiral Louis Antoine de Bougainville while accompanying him on his 1768 circumnavigation of the globe. Although the actual flower of the bougainvillea is usually white and quite small, each cluster of three flowers is surrounded by colourful, paper-thin structures called *bracts*. Consequently, the bougainvillea’s inflorescence resembles tiny flames within bright paper lanterns of pink, magenta, or purple. Other varieties are orange, white, and yellow. In fact, at least 300 hybrids of bougainvillea have emerged naturally or through interbreeding.

Cannon Ball Flower

The aptly named cannon ball tree appears to be draped with large, coconut-like fruit — as many as 150 on a single tree. But even more spectacular is its flamboyant showcase of flowers. The flowers are lavish in every sense: showy, fragrant and abundant. The cannon ball tree can literally clothe itself in flowers, bearing as many as 1,000 a day. Large pink and red petals are infused with yellow toward the tips. At their centre, a ring of yellow stamens creates the stage for a wave-like hood of pink stamens that end in a splash of yellow.



Cannon ball flower

Heliconia

Because of their popularity as an ornamental plant, the genus *Heliconia* includes numerous species, which in turn, have engendered even more hybrids and cultivars. Yet, despite variation in style and colour, you'll recognise heliconia by its distinctive, dramatic flowers that earn it common names such as "crab claw", and "false bird-of-paradise". Some varieties grow erect, while others

grow in a "pendant" style, with the plant bending to dangle its flowers from above. Interestingly, what we might understandably regard as the flower is really a colourful kind of *spathe* (the same sort of leaf-like feature found in bird-of-paradise) that conceals the true flower within. Besides being beautiful, heliconia flowers are also an important food source for hummingbirds, of which there are several species native to the Caribbean. Heliconia are herbaceous: when the growing season ends, the plant will die down to the soil level. But when the growing season resumes, its underground system of rhizomes gives rise to new leaves and another stunning display.

Hibiscus

The hibiscus flower has practically become the icon of the idyllic garden paradise.

The flower is large and trumpet-shaped, as though to announce its presence with an audible fanfare. A prominent pistil arcs strikingly from the centre of its colourful petals.

It is often associated with Polynesia, but hundreds of species of hibiscus are native throughout the tropics, subtropics, and warm-temperate regions of the world — including the Caribbean. True, in the Tahitian tradition, a young woman indicates whether she is available for courtship by which side of her head she wears the flower. But South Korea, Malaysia, and Haiti each claim a type of hibiscus as their national flower. And in Hindu worship, red hibiscus is the flower of the goddess Kali. An edible flower, hibiscus is commonly used for tea in many parts of the world. It has also been put to numerous medicinal purposes. In addition to its many human admirers, the hibiscus is also sought after by bees and hummingbirds.



Hibiscus