



A PASSION FOR PLUMERIA

Arturo Martinez shares his beloved plants

A telephone call I received from Mr. Arturo Martinez late in 2009 began a long, genuine, heartfelt relationship. This gentle man arrived in the United States from Cuba in 1965 when he was in his early twenties. He married his childhood sweetheart one year later and bought the Spanish-style house in Hollywood where he still lives. He quickly planted bougainvilleas, roses, crinum, dahlias, zinnias, jasmines and many other plants. The backyard, mostly concrete between the house and detached garage, was soon adorned with a pond in which he cared for up to 300 colorful koi. But, despite his best efforts, the environment he created was not fulfilling—something was still missing.

While driving through his neighborhood to work sometime in 1983, he noticed some plumeria stems

discarded in a trash can. Ah, that was it—the thing missing from his home oasis! Many sweet memories of his youth in Cuba suddenly came flooding back to him. Those frangipani stems reminded him of his childhood and especially his relatives (aunts, uncles and grandparents) who were very fond of this plant.

Those memories ignited a passionate, long love affair with plumeria and the rest is history—collecting, growing and even hybridizing them. Arturo's education as a chemist gave him the knowledge to refine the ratios of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium into a special fertilizer for his beloved plumeria. His compact concrete backyard was soon filled with more than 300 plants growing in pots of many sizes but ultimately in large, blue plastic pots. At times there

Photos by Frank McDonough



Arturo Martinez admires plumeria at his Hollywood home. Now sixty-six small trees from his collection reside in the South American section on Tallac Knoll. Though widely associated with Hawaii, plumeria are native only to the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America, South America to Brazil.

were so many plants that the containers crossed the invisible line his wife used to maneuver her car into the garage. When this happened, the containers would mysteriously get nudged out of the way.

Back to Arturo's telephone call—it was to inquire whether the Arboretum would accept a donation of plumeria from his collection. He had previously donated a couple of *Delonix regia* (royal poinciana) plants to the Arboretum and the association enticed him to think of us again. I adore both plants but have been fascinated with plumeria for decades. But, personal

interests and predilections aside, plumeria are completely compatible with the climate of Southern California. After several telephone conversations and visits to Arturo's home to view the plants, I accepted his donation of sixty-six small trees. They are now the feature of a new planting among trumpet trees, guavas, floss silk trees and hibiscus in the Arboretum's South American section on Tallac Knoll.

The Arboretum enhances its living collections in different ways. Throughout our history, seeds have been acquired from international field expeditions, as well as from botanical gardens worldwide. Plants have been purchased from commercial nurseries. And, some of the most rare and unusual plants have been donated by avid collectors, like Arturo, who wish to insure their plants' future and provide an educational opportunity for the community at large. ●

— James E. Henrich is Curator of Living Collections at the Arboretum.



Plumeria Basics

Frangipani, pagoda tree, dead man's fingers, oh my! A plumeria by any other name would smell as sweet! Well, OK, Shakespeare's prose paid homage to the rose. But frankly, many roses today don't really have a memorable fragrance. Plumeria flowers, in contrast, have such an enrapturing fragrance that I must smell another and another. The fragrance can be sweet like honey or lemony, fruity, spicy, musky or even vanilla-y.

Plumeria is a member of the dogbane family (*Apocynaceae*). Its cousins include: *Allamanda cathartica* (golden trumpet), *Carissa macrocarpa* (Natal plum), *Catharanthus roseus* (Madagascar periwinkle), *Mandevilla* (mandevilla), *Nerium oleander* (oleander), *Pachypodium lamerei* (Madagascar palm), *Tabernaemontana divaricata* (crape gardenia), *Trachelospermum jasminoides* (star jasmine) and *Vinca major* (periwinkle), to name a few.

Numerous species names exist for this genus, but most likely there are only 7 to 9 legitimate species. The genus was originally spelled *Plumiera*, commemorating the 17th century French botanist Charles Plumier, who documented many plant and animal species throughout the New World. The common name "frangipani" comes from a sixteenth-century Italian noble family who created a plumeria-scented perfume. Many people simply use the generic name "plumeria," while in Hawaii the name is "melia."

You might think plumeria are native to Hawaii because of the huge number of unrooted stem cuttings sold there, or perhaps because of leis. Frangipani is the sole component of one of the most popular leis, called the melia lei, comprised of about 50 flowers sewn into a single-strand circle. The plants thrive in the abundant sunshine and rich, rapidly draining volcanic soil of each of

the Hawaiian Islands. They have been widely cultivated in many subtropical and tropical areas of the world, especially in Thailand and the Philippines. But, plumeria are actually native only to the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America, and South America to Brazil.

They also thrive in the intense sunlight of Southern California. During the growing season, they benefit from supplemental irrigation but, at the same time, are forgiving and resilient due to their succulent nature. Plumeria are ideal candidates for landscapes in our communities even with the ever present water restrictions. And, although our wet and dry seasons are the reverse of their native habitat, they thrive as long as they are planted in well-drained soils and protected from extended periods of temperatures below freezing. ●

—J.E.H.



Henrich, James E. 2011. "Collections: a passion for plumeria, Arturo Martinez shares his beloved plants." *Exploring the arboretum : magazine for the members of the Los Angeles County Arboretum and Botanic Garden* 2011:summer/fall, 10–11.

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