



Jardín de Semillas Sagradas La Pedregoza

Corporación Ambiental La Pedregoza

Puerto Carreño, Vichada, Colombia

www.semillasagradas.org

The Challenges of Creating a Botanical Garden

by Dexter B. Dombro

If you had asked me 10 years ago whether I would ever create a botanical garden, I probably would have laughed at the idea. How times have changed! I have always been passionate about medicinal plants, but I never really thought about what that involves in a reforestation setting. Worse, it never really occurred to me that there are numerous tree and plant species that are endangered, and that losing them means possibly losing the cure for a serious disease. As I got more and more involved with tree planting and conservation in the Orinoco River basin, I realized that numerous trees there have amazing medicinal and alimentary properties. It is sad to note that our knowledge regarding those rain forest trees is being lost, as the use of big-pharmaceutical chemical drugs replaces traditional wisdom of natural cures and therapies around the world.



Bixa orellana is a typical medicinal and alimentary tree.



The selected site is 16 hectares or 40 acres in size.

Never having built a botanical garden before, I wasn't completely sure how to start. The first thing we did was look for a suitable site within the [Reserva Natural La Pedregoza](#). One site in particular looked like it offered a wide range of features ideal for the proposed garden. It had terrain that included low lying areas, well-drained areas, areas that inundate, serranía (the local rocky hills that dot the Orinoco River basin), all bordered by one of our fabulous *morichals*. We agreed that we had found the site for our [Jardín Botánico de Semillas Sagradas](#) (Sacred Seeds in Spanish) project. I called up a civil engineer and surveyor in Puerto Carreño and asked them to come out and create a topography and lot plan for the proposed botanical garden. A short time later we had a topographic plan in 25 cm elevations that covered a whopping 16 hectares or 40 acres. Somewhat stunned by the size of what we were about to do, a friend of ours joked that we were going to be busy for the next 20 years.

Thanks to our conservation work with the establishment of the [Reserva Natural La Pedregoza](#), I came into contact with analog forestry folks who told me about an interesting program being coordinated by the [Missouri Botanical Gardens](#) in the United States. They are actively looking for partners around the world who will establish botanical gardens dedicated to the preservation and conservation of traditional medicinal and alimentary trees and plants. The more I thought about it, the more I loved the idea. I discussed it with my co-founders at La Pedregoza, so we contacted the [Missouri Botanical Gardens](#), and with their blessing and support created the [Sacred Seeds Botanical Garden](#) at La Pedregoza.



The Sacred Seeds garden is backed by a gorgeous *morichal*.



Anandeanthera peregrina is a ceremonial tree in traditional medicine.

Armed with the topography plans, we contacted someone we knew in Edmonton, Canada, who had won an environmental prize for landscape design. [Arinna Gritanni](#) agreed to come to Colombia for 2 months as a volunteer and worked on a design for the Sacred Seeds garden. She arrived in January of 2013, and within 6 weeks had a design we liked. The plans feature a nice layout for the botanical garden that includes a camping area for school children, a visitor's center with seed bank, a board walk through the *morichal*, a tree nursery, paths, waterways and more. Now we were ready to start thinking about what all to plant.

I wanted local indigenous participation in the project. Several tribal members told me that they were quite concerned with the fact that their young people are losing the traditional knowledge of the trees and plants, thinking that all medicine comes from a pharmacy and all food from a supermarket. As shamans and elders die the traditional wisdom and knowledge is being lost. I was referred to [Francisco Antonio Castro Lima](#), a renowned indigenous botanist and agronomist from the Amazon region of Colombia, who is also considered one of the foremost botanical experts on Orinoco River basin flora. Francisco agreed to act as a consultant, and has provided an entire nursery of native medicinal and alimentary trees he started for us in Villavicencio.



L-R: Dexter Dombro, Oscar Forero Azabache, Francisco Antonia Castro Lima, Dr. Kochurani Dombro, Arinna Gritanni and Sabine Kotzbauer



Ocotea cymbarum seeds collected by La Pedregoza staff.

At the same time I have been verifying which medicinal and alimentary trees are native to the Orinoco. We have been collecting their seeds and germinating them in the tree nursery at La Pedregoza. At present it looks like we will have some 60 species of trees and palms that are medicinal or alimentary, which we can plant in the Sacred Seeds garden, though some species are endangered and getting seeds for many species remains a challenge. Financing is also a big issue. I discussed the project with Maxime Renaudin of [Tree-Nation](#), when he visited the La Pedregoza plantation in January 2013. Both he and his wife Amparo were taken by the idea of a Sacred Seeds garden. Next thing I knew we had [Tree-Nation](#) backing, which is a tremendous help in making this project a reality. I can now say that we are truly well on our way to creating an amazing botanical garden with a unique focus, one that will benefit all of humanity.

Where do we go from here? 2013 is a great year so far. [A. Raymond Corporate North America, Inc.](#) has donated 4 solar water pumps to the [Reserva Natural La Pedregoza](#), which will allow us to irrigate among other things the plants in the Sacred Seeds garden, using a well we are perforating for that purpose. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for such a wonderful donation. I know that they were inspired by the concept of conserving traditional medicinal and alimentary plants, regardless of the location. Now we are going the get busy, start implementing the design plans and, of course, plant trees on site. I am excited about the fact that we are also including palm trees in this process, as many species of palms play important roles in traditional medicines and foods. We continue to receive offers of specialized volunteer labor and useful donations. One of the best aspects of this is just how many people not only see the need for such gardens, but are willing to help in whatever way they can to make our [Sacred Seeds Botanical Garden](#) at La Pedregoza a reality.



Irrigation water tank at Reserva Natural La Pedregoza.