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Passionate about plants in Puerto Vallarta



The Puerto Vallarta Botanical Garden supports research to study and propagate native plants.

SHARON MCDONNELL PHOTO

PUERTO VALLARTA, Mexico—Some people can't put together a desk from a DIY store. Robert Price assembled an entire botanical garden from scratch.

Price, a former restaurant owner from Savannah, Ga., is the founder, executive director and curator of the Vallarta Botanical Gardens – a breezy Shangri La hideaway that sprawls over the Sierra Madre Mountains.

He first spotted the site on Mexico's Pacific coast on a 1991 drive with a friend from Acapulco.

"As we started getting closer to Puerto Vallarta, the vegetation began to change," he says.

"We began to see forests of twisted pine and oak trees, all dripping with orchids – and I wanted to stay and explore.

"One day, I thought I'd come back and explore these mountains more thoroughly."

He was surprised that a region of such astounding natural beauty had no botanical garden.

"When I came here, I saw plants I'd never seen before," he says. "I thought, what a shame – someone should open one."

He vowed to create his own garden, and, after selling his restaurant in Florida, he did. There were a few obstacles: no road to the land, which was just cattle pasture, no electricity, no funds – or even much interest – from the Mexican government.

"The idea of botanical gardens in the United States, Canada, and Europe – the concept of plants as entertainment and for education – didn't exist yet here in Mexico," he says.

Over time, a road was chiselled out of the mountainside. Water and electricity were brought in. Walking trails were laid.

Plants were purchased, and the Vallarta Botanical Garden opened in 2005, a testament to a will and a dream – and more than \$2 million (U.S.) in private funds.

The public El Tuito bus from Puerto Vallarta's Romantic Zone hugs the coastal road above the Bay of Banderas on a scenic half-hour ride. It passes Mismaloya Beach, where director John Huston, seduced by the region's lush jungle beauty, filmed *Night of the Iguana*.

We pass Le Kliff restaurant – whose stone walls and steps are built at the edge of a cliff.

The bus stops in front of the Vallarta Gardens. I stroll past waxy red anthuriums, magenta-coloured Royal Poincianas, a tree fern forest and a swinging bridge, and enter an orchid conservatory, which showcases different species of Mexican vanilla orchids, from big purple blooms, to delicate white ones dotted with yellow.

In other parts of the garden, there's a serene reflecting pool, chocolate, coffee and vanilla orchid gardens, fields of blue agave, the plant used to make tequila, cactus and palm gardens and a tropical fruit tree grove.

Pausing in the hacienda-like visitor centre – where people recline on colourful daybeds – special events director and Vancouver native Dianna Madsen tells the story of the garden.

"Bob was a visionary," she says. "I doubt any botanic garden in Mexico covers so many indigenous plants."

Since the garden is financed exclusively through entrance fees, garden memberships, and generous benefactors, steps in the visitor centre are emblazoned with donors' names. The

orchid conservatory was built thanks to a retired couple from Chicago, who live in Puerto Vallarta part-time.

"We were just driving by one day and saw the garden, and Robert and his mother showed us around. We were so impressed by their passion for Mexico and their enthusiasm," says Mary Ellen Holstein.

Dr. Justin Williams, former director of Zilker Botanic Garden in Austin, Texas, directs a research centre at the garden to study and propagate Mexican plants, particularly orchids.

"What the Vallarta Botanical Gardens has managed to achieve in the absence of government support is truly impressive," he says.

"The energy that Robert and the rest of the staff put into maintaining it is not rivalled by any other garden of its size."

Says Price proudly, "I feel so lucky to be living and working in Mexico. People visiting the gardens tell us, 'We're so happy we found this place!'"

Sharon McDonnell is a New Orleans, La.-based freelance writer.