

Plants for Our Future: Collecting Plants Around the World

Pierre Piroche

Piroche Plants, Inc., 20542 McNeil Road, Pitt Meadows, B.C. Y3Y 1Z1 Canada

I have been interested in plant searches since the late 1950s. I traveled mainly in Asia then to Australia and Tasmania for close to 7 years before I finally settled in Canada.

Putting my life as a bum behind, it was a little while later in the late 1970s when I got the bug again to look for plants and over the years collected plants in many areas in South America, East Africa, several times in China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and lately in Laos.

I am a nurseryman, not a scientist; therefore, I look at plants more for their ornamental and medicinal value than for their scientific classification or other application.

Since I began traveling I have witnessed the mass destruction of flora throughout the world by deforestation and other means. We have lost countless plant species and countless other forms of life. We have lost many opportunities to gain knowledge. We have greatly impoverished our planet and are continuing to do so at an enormous rate.

One of the main purposes of Piroche Plants Inc., started in 1987, is to introduce species of potential ornamental or medicinal value that are on the verge of extinction.

A joint venture was set in Nanjing, China, in cooperation with the Nanjing Botanical Garden in 1993 to search for new or endangered species, to propagate and to do the first evaluation before proceeding with continuing research and commercialization here at Piroche Plants, Canada.

We have in the last few years introduced many plants worldwide. The pleasure of being able to smell the fragrance for the first time of *Styrax odoratissimus*, makes all this very worthwhile.

These slides will show you a glimpse of the diversity of the Laos flora, most of which remains unclassified. The literature used in Laos is "Noms Verniculaires de Plantes en Usage au Laos" by Jules Vidal, published in 1959. A rare book but still covering only a fraction of the flora of Laos. So much now remains to be done. Laos has only two botanists; therefore, a long road lies ahead to compile substantially the flora of this beautiful country which may be one of the richest in the world.

One interesting note, the botanists or foresters in Laos are able to identify plants by taste alone while walking in the jungle. One of the reasons given is that in the jungle, the vines and tree canopies are generally so difficult to see that tasting the plant is more reliable than by other observations; no decisions are reached without having a bite!