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Gloxinian 47(1): 18-21.

REFNO: 2763

KEYWORDS:

Brazil, *Sinningia*

the

GLOXINIAN

The Journal for Gesneriad Growers

Vol. 47, No. 1

First Quarter 1997



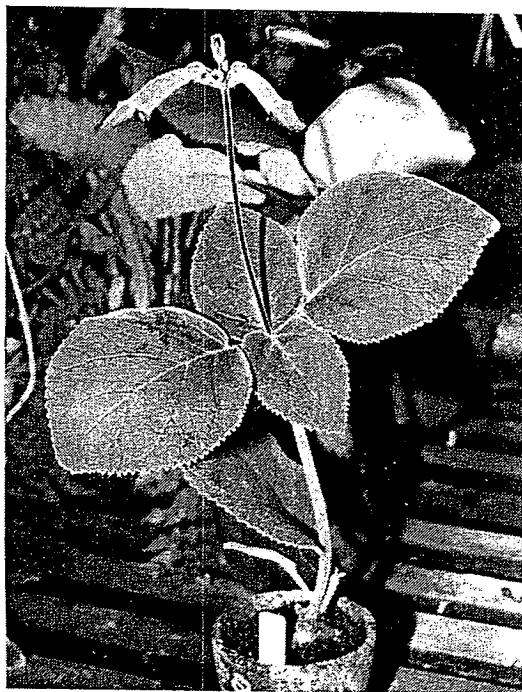
Nematanthus fornix

From a Brazilian Market to a New York Showroom: The Story of *Sinningia iarae*

Alain Chautems <chautems@cjb.unige.ch>
4 chermin du Paquier, CH-1231 Conches/Ge, Switzerland

Among the several interesting discoveries I made during my research on the genus *Sinningia* in Brazil, the case of *Sinningia iarae* is one of the nicest. Everything started in Mauro Peixoto's greenhouse in the mid 1980's. From a plant bought at a small plant market near São Paulo, Mauro quickly realised that it was something different from any known *Sinningia*. Impressed by the large, elegant dark pink flowers, he decided to give it a cultivar name of his own and chose his sister's name, Iara. Interested in discovering the origin of the plant in the wild, he asked the vendor who did not know if the tuber had been collected "some place in Minas Gerais" or if the plant was a hybrid of unknown origin.

When I saw the plant for the first time in 1989, I took pictures and asked Mauro insistently about the origin of this nice material. When Mauro swore that he had selfed the plant and it had come true from seed, I had to admit that it was an undescribed species. And it definitely was not an ordinary one with its compact habit and leaves reduced to one or two whorls of four topped by large pink hooded flowers. Among unidentified material in



Sinningia iarae in Mauro's greenhouse.



Herbarium sheet at "Instituto de Botanica" in São Paulo.

the collection of Gesneriaceae kept in the "Instituto de Botanica" herbarium in São Paulo, I had noticed three herbarium sheets and in 1989 had written a label with the indication "*Sinningia* sp. nov.". When I looked at them again in 1991, I was struck by an illumination: the three collections matched what Mauro called *Sinningia* "Iara". The collection data indicated two localities in the state of São Paulo: "Ilha da Vitoria" for two collections made in 1965, and "Santos, Sombrio" for the other one found in 1924. This was exciting information, and Mauro and I decided to organise a trip as soon as possible.

Santos is a big harbour and industrial city now, and we thought we had no chance of finding plants still surviving there. Ilha da Vitoria, a tiny island off the mainland coast, seemed a much better locale to visit so we drove from Mauro's place down to the coast. We stopped by São Sebastiao and soon discovered that the only way to reach Ilha da Vitoria was with a rented motorboat. The weather had turned very bad with rough seas and heavy downpours, and the price asked for the boat trip was exorbitant. Was it worth taking some risks and spending a lot of money to find, if we were lucky, the true origin of a new species?

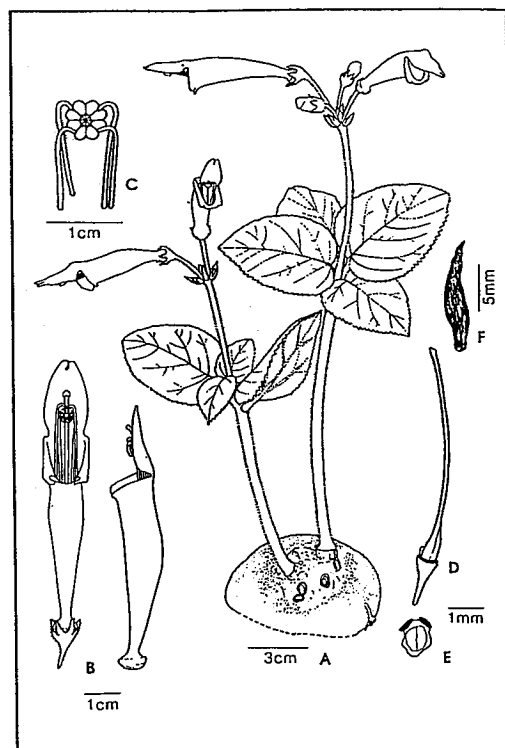


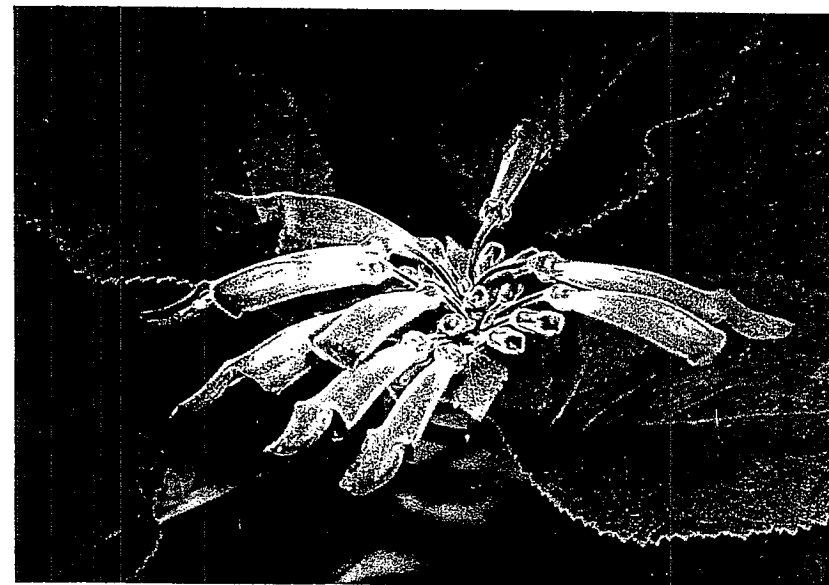
Figure 2: *Sinningia iarae* Chautems
 Illustrator: Angelina Prisco
 Legend: A) habit; B) corolla, front view and side view; C) anther arrangement; D) style and nectariferous gland; E) nectary diagram; F) seed. [A-E based on cultivated material, AC-1493]

Illustration of *Sinningia iarae* published in GESNERIANA 1(1).

After spending a night sleeping on this hard question, we decided to stay on safe tracks and drove back in the direction of São Paulo. The coastal road runs mostly at a short distance from the seashore. The traffic was heavy, full of trucks linking the Santos harbour to the fifteen million inhabitants of the capital city. The roadside was far from showing good looking untouched vegetation. We decided to stop anyway by a rocky area where the granitic rock had probably been carved at the time of the road construction. It took us a few minutes to spot some familiar looking tubers and we quickly found a way of climbing and bringing back a few specimens. What excitement when we identified our catch as a four-leaved whorled sinningia. Even in the absence of inflorescence, we were pretty sure we recognised the material as that grown by Mauro as *Sinningia* "Iara". A few months later, the GRF expedition collected some more material in the same place. All the elements necessary for a complete description of the new species were now gathered.

Back in Geneva, with a tuber to grow in the greenhouse, I waited until flowers were produced coincidentally with the presence of an illustrator at hand. From live and pickled or dried material I examined in São Paulo, Geneva and Sarasota, I took all the measurements in order to write a comprehensive description. The next step was to send it to a scientific journal, and I thought that it would be nice to contribute to the first issue of GESNERIANA. It took some time before it was published, and in the meantime seed had been distributed through the AGGS Seed Fund. Finally, *Sinningia iarae* came into scientific existence in 1995 honoring Mauro's sister. Besides its elegant habit and decorative flowers, *S. iarae* deserves special consideration. It is a very rare species as are many other recent introductions from the wild. No doubt it would fit under the endangered or vulnerable status following the IUCN red list categories. Growing it is also a way of keeping alive a tiny bit of tropical biodiversity.

The happy ending occurred in New York in 1996 at the AGGS Flower Show when two well-grown plants, one entered by Carolyn Ripps and one by Dee and Bob Stewart, both were awarded ribbons. What a nice achievement since this species was first found by Mauro as an anonymous tuber at a small plant market!



Sinningia iarae exhibited by the Stewarts at the 1996 Convention Flower Show.
 Photo by Alain Chautems.