

**Skog & Talpey 1971**

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**Gloxinian 21(3): 7-9.**

**REFNO: 935**

**KEYWORDS:**

***Gesneria*, Haiti**

MAY/JUNE  
Vol. 21

1971  
No. 3

*The* **Gloxinian**  
THE MAGAZINE FOR GESNERIAD GROWERS



*Gesneria humilis*

# Rediscovery of *Gesneria humilis*

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At the end of the seventeenth century many botanists and plant collectors were at the same time missionaries who visited far-away lands to study plants while performing their religious duties. One of the most famous of these was Charles Plumier who went to the West Indies from his native France between 1689 and 1697. During Plumier's second voyage in 1693 he traveled extensively in what is now the Republic of Haiti. There he observed and drew the plants he found in the exotic native vegetation. He wrote descriptions and later published books about the plants he saw on his travels.

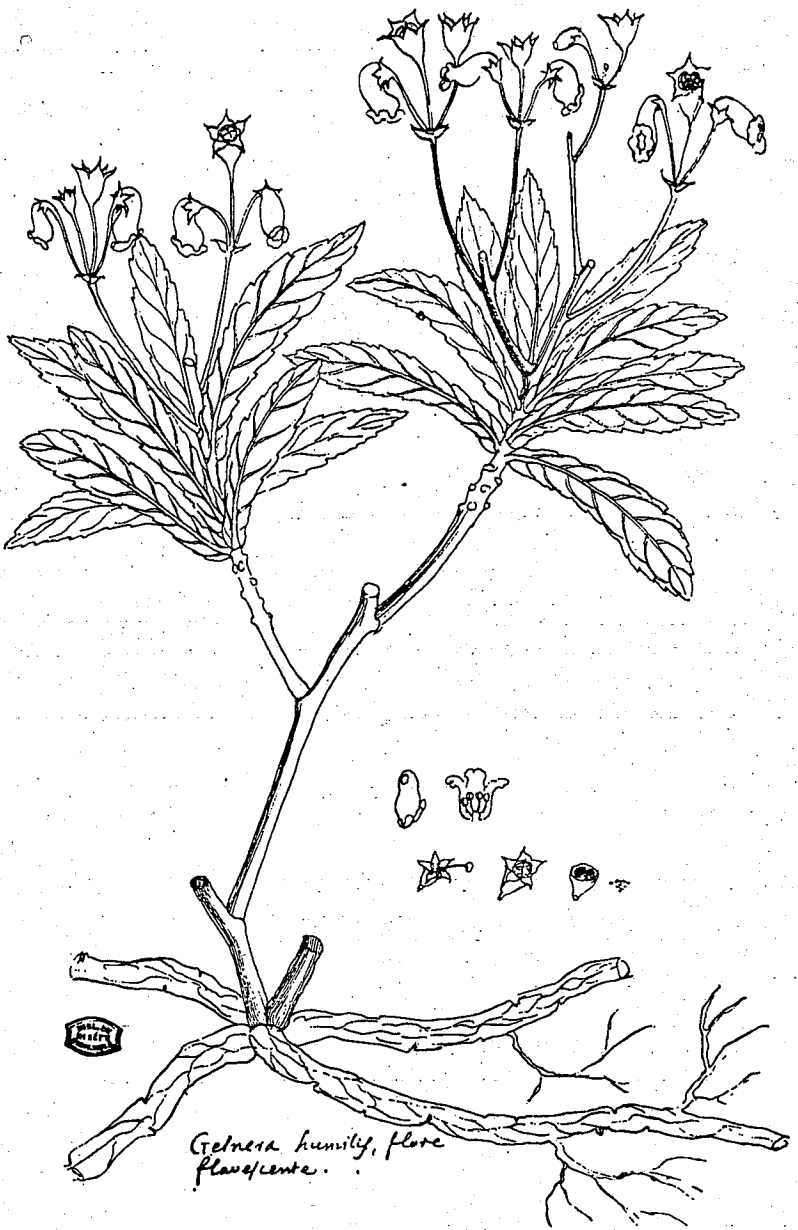
Although his magnificent drawings and descriptions were never published in their entirety, Plumier did publish fragments of his discoveries between 1693 and 1705. The manuscripts of his works are now in the Bibliothèque Centrale of the Paris Muséum. One of his published works, known as *Nova Plantarum americanarum genera* and published in 1703, was used by Linnaeus as a basis for many of the names of plants he validly published in 1753 in his *Species Plantarum*.

Unfortunately, Plumier did not preserve specimens of the plants he drew and many have not been seen since his time. Such was the case with *Gesneria humilis*, a species accepted as the type (the species on which a genus is based) of the genus *Gesneria*. This name is based only on a Plumier drawing and description with no extant material. To find a plant such as Plumier drew and described as *Gesneria humilis* was the object of the authors' visit to Haiti in July, 1970.

Other collectors, such as the Swedish botanist Erik Ekman (1883-1931), have attempted to find this rare plant but failed because of their ignorance of Plumier's locality or because of the difficulties in traveling and collecting in Haiti. One of the authors (T. E. T.) visited Haiti in 1966 but was unable to find the exact locality. Plumier's description of the locality for *G. humilis* is "along a small stream in a place commonly called Le fond de Baudin near the region of Léogâne" (transl. from the original Latin). On a rare map printed by the Dominican Republic (1952) the name "Fond de Boudin" (note slightly different spelling) indicated a vague region south of Léogâne. The area today is mountainous as it was in Plumier's time, but now the forests have been

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Drawing of *Gesneria humilis* made by Plumier in 1693 and obtained by one of the authors (L.E.S.) from a manuscript in Paris. Reproduced from Plumier's *Botanicum americanum* t.6 (Ms. 6), courtesy of the Bibliothèque centrale of the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle, Paris.

cut giving the impression of a rocky, arid land cut by many rivers supporting a population struggling to survive. In the valleys there are few places where the native flora still grows protected out of reach on a steep cliff. The authors had little hope of finding *G. humilis*, upon which the entire concept of *Gesneria* is founded, because the special conditions which most *gesnerias* require did not seem to exist in that arid climate. We believed also that Fond de Baudin was the name of a place during the colonial period and perhaps not commonly known today.

Thus, it was with barren hope we arrived in Port-au-Prince, the capital of the republic. Through our contacts with missionaries living near Port-au-Prince, we met Ilsait, a man from the Léogâne area. To our surprise Ilsait (French for "he knows") lived up to his name: Fond de Baudin was a valley only a 45-minute walk from his home. We made plans to visit Fond de Baudin as soon as possible.

On July 22 we set out early from Port-au-Prince accompanied by Rosemond Jeudi, agronomist at the University of Haiti who, in addition to his invaluable aid during our entire stay in Haiti, provided a jeep; Donald Pfister, a mycologist from Cornell University; Armando, our armed guard; a mechanic in case of car trouble; and Ilsait from the mission. Leaving the city we stopped at the police station to present our safe conduct passes (which are necessary to travel anywhere in Haiti). The end of the paved road came only a few miles farther and then began two hours of back-breaking ride over unbelievably rough roads of limestone rocks and holes. Often the road was a riverbed and dry in many places. We passed Léogâne and turned south toward Jacmel. We left the jeep at Trouin and began to walk following the river Toreau northeast into the hills. After a short time we reached Fond de Baudin, a narrow river valley bounded by pastures, banana plantations, and manioc patches in the shelter of a few large *Ceiba* trees. This seemed like an unlikely dry habitat for a humidity-loving *Gesneria*. We walked farther, crossing the shallow river from side to side. Finally the valley narrowed to only a gravel bank on one side and a steep volcanic cliff on the other. It was there on that cliff that we saw the first plant of *Gesneria humilis* growing about four inches above the surface of the water and clinging to the crevices in the rocks. The plants bore small greenish-yellow flowers with the shape and size of a miniature *Sinningia* but with unmistakable *Gesneria* characteristics and leaves.

Numerous collections were made of the plants, the first believed made in 277 years. To bring this plant into cultivation, seeds and cuttings were collected and are presently being grown and studied to aid in understanding this genus of West Indian plants.