Interlude: China Rose

What, you may ask, do the names Devil’s Gold, All Aglow, Mini Skirt, Blooming Blazers, Blue Berry Tart, Brown Bomber and Terry Smith have in common? They are the unlikely names given to some hybridised blooms of the Hibiscus rosa-sinensis, otherwise known as the China Rose, or, more commonly, the Hibiscus.

Developed by the gardeners of Chinese Emperors and Mandarins as something exotically new for their masters, the hibiscus is now more synonymous with the South Pacific Islands of Hawaii and Fiji, and places such as Florida, Australia and Madagascar. It is the state flower of Hawaii, and the most popular carnival in Fiji is the Hibiscus Carnival.

No doubt the plant was brought into the Pacific by the migrations of people from South East Asia, but there are known to be some indigenous varieties in Hawaii and Reunion, and a single one on Fiji’s lush garden island of Taveuni.

There are dozens of genus hibiscus, but the queen of them all is the Hibiscus rosa-sinensis.

Hundreds of varieties of this can be found and they all have their own individual charm, but they are poor cousins to the incredibly striking blooms that have been engineered by man.

Men such as Fiji’s Ken Perks, who lived all his life in the islands and had a love affair with the hibiscus since boyhood. Following his retirement after 35 years in the public service, his infatuation blossomed as he honed his skills at hybridisation. The results of his efforts are, simply put, spectacular.

Ken Perks had few of the artistic refinements or academic pomp that is normally associated with flower lovers. He was a rugged, private man, who smoked odious home-grown Fiji tobacco and drank over-proof Fiji rum. But he was driven by a researcher’s dogged perseverance. His reward was the beauty that results from hybridisation. ‘After that,’ he said, ‘I have no interest.’

It was his wife, Joy, who catalogued the hundreds of new varieties that he created and reaped the pleasure of having a house full of blooms.

‘Growing hibiscus is just something to do,’ he says matter-of factly.

But make no mistake, hybridisation takes many years of patient dedication.

Thousands of attempts are made to pollinate the flower with the pollen of another hibiscus. The flower then falls off, leaving a seed pod, and the seeds are
planted. If the plant grows, it remains constant, with a distinctive new bloom. But it is a hit or miss affair. You can’t design a new bloom, and what you get is a surprise.

Out of a thousand trials, he might get only two hibiscuses that are worth keeping. The rest of the creations will be too ordinary to retain. ‘Keeping them,’ noted Perks, ‘would be like collecting the same postage stamp with only the perforation being different.’

In the early years of his interest in hybridisation, he didn’t have much success. It wasn’t until he managed to procure some of the magnificent Hawaiian varieties, which he crossed with local hibiscus and grafted onto hardy stalks, that he was able to create something special.

Many who have specialised in hybridisation have aimed at producing spectacular blooms with scant attention to the strength of the plant and little chance of reproduction from cuttings. Through grafting, Ken Perks has made it possible for other hibiscus lovers to grow his flowers in their gardens.

The hibiscus is called the ‘Senitoa’ in Fijian, meaning the flower of the chicken, perhaps because the stamen resembles a cock’s comb. Naming new blooms is all part of the fun. The names seem to be more often related to specific people, but they can arise out of other situations. Once Ken saw an exquisite bloom and exclaimed ‘Oh!’ And that was what it was called: ‘Oh.’

Hibiscus growers in Florida, Hawaii and Australia are usually members of a hibiscus society, through which members exchange knowledge and share in each other’s successes. Not so Ken Perks. He neither sought nor was given any international recognition for the uniquely marvelous flowers he created, or for the expertise that he demonstrated. It was all for personal satisfaction.

While the hibiscus is a tropical bloom, Ken claims that he has seen better blooms in Auckland and Sydney. ‘Perhaps the variable climate is more agreeable. Ours is more constant, rather harsh. We probably get more blooms throughout the year, but they are better in New Zealand.’

While Ken had 400 or so plants in his garden, he advised the home gardener to keep only ten or 12 plants and tender them with care by regular fertilising and pruning.

It is an oddly incongruous fact that while Perks had some of the best hibiscus in the South Pacific, the blooms are produced on plants that are scraggy, stunted and ratty looking.

‘At age 74, it has become too much work to look after them all. I don’t worry about bugs or diseases, I leave that to Mother Nature.’
It is a risk that he took as hibiscus are threatened by a host of such pests.

But the blooms gave him great pleasure. ‘I often just sit and admire them and wonder how my hands managed to work so well with nature.’ His success is a contradiction of Rousseau’s opinion that ‘Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.’

But others have reaped the pleasure as well. Ken’s wife Joy was Personal Assistant to former Prime Minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara for 25 years. Each day throughout that period, she took a selection of flowers to Ratu Mara’s office for him and his visitors to admire.

Fiji artist Liebling Marlowe, who was the first Miss Hibiscus in 1956, comments: ‘Looking at hibiscus blooms gives me a feeling of joy, happiness and peace. It makes me feel good to be alive.’

Hibiscus is the favourite choice of exotic island girls, and the flower tucked behind the ear focuses attention on both the face and flora.

Unlike many flowers, hibiscus have no scent. Its appeal lies in a rich blending of colours, the unusual curl of single and double petals, its luster, size and sheer overall beauty.

While most flowers, such as roses and carnations, display beauty in the cluster of folded petals, the China Rose has only five petals which unfold in the morning to reveal its charm. By nightfall, after only a few hours of exotic loveliness, the petals of China Rose wrap around the stamen column and die.

After wandering around Ken’s garden in Suva, I was invited into his lounge, where a magnificent pink hibiscus, about ten inches across, stood in solitary splendor on the centre of his table. ‘Strike me pink, that’s magnificent,’ I blurted out. He smiled and said ‘I haven’t named it yet, but thanks for the idea. I’ll call it “Strike me Pink.”’