

Pushing the limits of tropical gardening

TROPICAL TREASURES

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TO RUSSIA WITH THANKS AND PRAISE

BY DANIEL J. GILBRIDE

PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

Two years ago, I followed a dream and moved to St. Croix, the Virgin Islands. Shortly after arriving, I began to find plants, specifically hibiscus, dying. The ends of each branch and bracket were folded into themselves, and many looked to have fungal or bacterial anomalies. Others were the host for a variety of plant dependent insects. I wandered the island seeking these plants and asking gardeners what they thought was happening. The consensus was that these compromised plants were caused by insect damage, which in turn left them more vulnerable to infestations of fungi, bacteria and molds.

Not having great experience at that time with local plants, specifically hibiscus, the explanations basically made sense. It is important to note at that time I began to design and implement my own gardens at home, filled with both native and heirloom hybrids of hibiscus. My plants were healthy, and I watched carefully for any insects that might



Typical symptoms: only a few crumpled leaves left on a stem. Growth areas are gnarled and can't produce new growth or flowers.

Plant School and Clinic

cause my plants to have “the blight.” Still, I was perturbed by something that did not fit about the plants I observed and the explanations provided.

What did not make sense to me was that many of the sick plants I saw in the field had been treated both with insecticides and antibacterial soap baths. Yes, the bunched ends did look cleaner with no current evidence of insects, but none of the plants had returned to normal growth or to flowering. Even new growth crimped and balled nearly instantly after its initial growth. This anomaly stuck with me, and I intended to research it when I had the time. Unfortunately, I didn't set aside time for what turned out to be a much more significant problem, as indicated clearly by the plants that had already been treated but remained quite ill.

Plant School and Clinic: Plants are living creatures, they eat, drink, breath, multiply, get sick and die. They are not immortal, but in many cases something can be done to help them to survive a stress or overcome a disease. The question is - what needs to be done?

I finally remembered and made the time when I found a plant in my yard that was completely halted in terms of growth, let alone flowering, due to this condition. Yes, I did do the island-recommended treatment of tobacco water on insects and an antibacterial soap bath for fungus and bacteria.

There were still a few healthy specimens on the far side of the yard for me to study, but these, too, began to get the

same symptoms the other plants had. Having checked them day and night, I was sure that there were no insects involved in the onset of the disorder. Yes, the insects did come, as did the bacteria, but only after damage to the leaves created a sheltered feeding ground for insects and a wind blocked, high humidity area for bacteria to lodge and flourish.

At that point, I started to suspect some sort of virus had basically infected the entire island. This same sequence of the disease also began to show in other, more common or wild tropical plants, thereby creating a way for this virus to travel quickly and reach every nook and cranny of my beloved horticultural playground. I went to work immediately on research into plants, viruses and treatment.

Having spent a good deal of time perusing the wealth of information at Top Tropicals, I ordered and studied the two Russian-made treatments for tropical plants, EPIN and CIRKON. At first, I attempted cleaning the plants with an antibacterial soap bath, followed by an application of CIRKON alone. There was some improvement, but it was short lived and was tainted by my having such a strong hope that it would work. In the end, there was no new

growth, and the gnarling continued with a vengeance.

Three weeks later, I became more aggressive, as I was sure to lose my heirloom hybrids. I began by marking each plant with a ribbon, as the mixed shelf life of each treatment is short. I purchased new spray bottles to ensure that there were no bacteria to weaken the support to the plants' immune systems. Each infected plant was prepped by removing with sharp clippers any leaves or plant ends that had ended up in tight and infected balls of leaf and stem. Each plant was then provided with a soap bath to remove any significant bacterial build-up. Then, I followed with a clean wash of pure water, some drying time, and then one spraying of CIRKON followed by a spraying of EPIN.

In the photos accompanying this piece, my hibiscus got the support they needed in a systemic manner. Within a week, new growth sprouted. The leaves were unfurled, healthy and grew at a surprisingly rapid rate. It is now one month after treatment. With just one exception, all hibiscus are back in bloom. The plants are covered with leaves, healthy, green and glossy. At least on one part of what we call the Gem of the Caribbean, the plants are back, and one



Daniel J. Gilbride, licensed horticultural consultant, lives in Christiansted, St. Croix, USVI. Dan's life was changed when he met one of the original organic gardeners, Ruth Stout (author of "The No Work Garden Book" and "How to Have a Green Thumb Without an Aching Back"). At the age of 9, she took him under her wing and taught him the basics of gardening, horticulture and how to intensely watch and "listen" to a plant. He continued with this passion until at the age of 17, he was a guest speaker at New Mexico State University on asexual propagation. In 1999, he was hit in a

small vehicle by a truck, and was told he would never garden, let alone walk or work again. In 2005, Dan continued his self-rehabilitation fueled by his love of plants and nature, and moved to St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands. He initially crawled out to the yard, but again inspired by wanting to do more, now walks, lectures on various plant cultures to plant groups, has a home nursery, and is on the cusp of opening "The Garden of Croix", a combination of a botanical garden and a garden center. Whether creeping, crawling, walking or nearly running, he now has a stock of over 7,000 tropical plants to offer to St. Croix for the greening of the island.