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OUR NATION'S CROWN JEWELS

U.S. Botanic Garden Showcases Rare and Endangered Plants of Hawai'i

August 8, 2003 - Washington, DC - The Kaua'i Native Plant Society in collaboration with the United States Botanic Garden is bringing a collection of some 60 rare and endangered native Hawaiian plant species to the Garden in Washington, D.C. The plants will be the centerpiece of an exhibit titled *Our Nation's Crown Jewels: Rare and Endangered Species of Hawai'i* and will remain on display in the USBG Conservatory from August 29 through November 23, 2003. The exhibit, produced through the cooperation of 12 organizations under the aegis of Garden Island Resource Conservation & Development, Inc., coincides with the year 2003 being the "Year of the Hawaiian Forest."

Paired with *Our Nation's Crown Jewels* will be an exhibit of photographic portraits of rare Hawaiian plants and animals. Titled *Remains of a Rainbow*, these photographs by David Liittschwager and Susan Middleton will be on display in the West Orangerie of the USBG Conservatory from August 29 through January 11, 2004.

To honor the opening of both exhibits, dancers, musicians, and singers will perform traditional Hawaiian songs and dances at 12:00 noon on Saturday, August 30, in the USBG Conservatory West Gallery. The performers are members of Ka 'Imi Na'auao O Hawai'i Nei, an educational, non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Hawaiian culture.

Members of the media are invited to a special, opening-day press event at the U.S. Botanic Garden on Friday, August 29, at 3:00 p.m. in the Conservatory West Gallery. Members of the press are encouraged to confirm their attendance by contacting Jan Clark at 202-226-7674 or jclark@aoc.gov.

Today, Hawai'i is home to a wealth of biodiversity and home to many species found nowhere else on Earth. It has more rare and endangered species than any other state in the union. This has not always been the case. In the 225 years since westerners made contact with the islands, the extinction rate of these plants has skyrocketed. Now, many of these disappearing natives will take up residence in the USBG Conservatory.

One of them, the *Brighamia insignis*, is endemic to two islands - Kaua'i and Ni'ihau - where only four populations with 20 individuals are known. A rugged individualist, the *Brighamia* is found only in places where introduced wild goats, athletic as they are, cannot reach. For many years, as the *Brighamia* population declined,

botanists believed its pollinator, the green sphinx moth, was extinct. Not so. But in the meantime, field botanists rappelled down to individual plants to collect and hand-dust pollen onto the flowers. No easy task, considering the plants cling to vertical cliffs that drop some 2,000 feet or more into the ocean.

Another plant, the *Kokia drynarioides*, rivals the skirt of a flamenco dancer with its sensuous color and attractive curved petals. Its habitat is the severely degraded, dry lowland forest of the Big Island, where only two populations exist, for a total of five individual plants.

The U.S. Botanic Garden has a long history of receiving plants from afar, beginning with the four-year, world-wide U.S. Exploring Expedition. Led by Lt. Charles Wilkes, the Expedition returned to the U.S. in 1842 with over 10,000 dried plant specimens, as well as 200 living plants that became the core of the founding collection of the U.S. Botanic Garden.

Among the Expedition plants was *Wilkesia gymnoxiphium*, closely related to the better-known Hawaiian silversword but named after Wilkes and included in the endangered plants of *Our Nation's Crown Jewels*. Also included in the exhibit will be the USBG's own specimens of the native Hawaiian yellow hibiscus, *Hibiscus brackenridgei*, discovered by the U.S. Exploring Expedition on Maui and later named after William Brackenridge, one of the Expedition botanists. It is the state flower of Hawai'i, but it, too, is endangered for it grows in only twelve small populations found on five of the Hawaiian Islands.

The plants in *Our Nation's Crown Jewels* have been chosen to represent four distinct habitats: wet forest, mesic forest, dryland forest, and coastal lowland. The habitats are distinguished by amount and seasonality of precipitation, elevation, and presence of salt spray. A series of interpretive panels will explain how the unique flora of the Hawaiian Islands is threatened by habitat loss, invasive species, and other factors. The exhibit will underscore how these factors are impacting flora worldwide.

"We're excited to be welcoming this important collection of plants," says Dr. Christine Flanagan of the U.S. Botanic Garden. "Although the exhibit will end in a few months, many of these plants will become incorporated into our permanent displays, and others will be cared for as part of our continuing commitment to the preservation of endangered plants."

Although *Our Nation's Crown Jewels* focuses on plants, the survival of entire communities, including all their resident life forms, is threatened. For a full appreciation of what's at stake, the simultaneous USBG exhibit *Remains of a Rainbow* will feature dramatic photographic portraits of both endangered plants and animals of Hawai'i.

The United States Botanic Garden Conservatory is open to the public, free of charge, every day of the year from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The Conservatory is located at 100 Maryland Avenue, SW, at the foot of the U.S. Capitol on the National Mall. Visitors are encouraged to take Metrobus and Metrorail. Further information is available by calling 202-225-8333 or visiting our web site at www.usbg.gov.

