

Discovering new plants

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Plant exploration and new plant development has always fascinated me. On a recent trip to Ecuador with a group of Ohio State University Extension Master Gardener Volunteers, we talked a bit about how new plants are discovered and how they might come to market.

The topic came up when several noticed plants such as lantana, fuschia, hibiscus, and several other plants that we either grow as tropical or annuals.

Many of our annuals and tropical plants come from South America where they are either native or have come from other countries and can grow in this climate.

Lantana for instance is a shrub in Ecuador and is used many times as a hedge. It's trimmed much like we would trim taxus or boxwood.



Our tropical hibiscus is a small tree in Ecuador.

The tropical hibiscus that we buy each spring and place on the patio for the hummingbirds, *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis* originated in Asia. However, it grows easily in the Andean Highlands.

In Ohio, we have to either take this into a greenhouse or the basement for the winter or hope that it makes it through to the next season.

In Ecuador, the plant is more of a small tree that is pretty incredible. On top of the beauty of the flowers, it's always loaded with hummingbirds!

For years plant explorers traveled the world to find new plants to introduce to the market. They would find totally new species that have never been seen before, or they might find a plant that has been seen before but perhaps this one has different characteristics such as a unique flower color or shape.

Today, it seems to me that there are fewer and fewer new species discovered. I don't hear as much about plant exploration trips like I did back in the 70s, 80s and 90s.

I now see more plants come to market that are cultivars or variations of species that we already have or know about. This is not a bad thing either.



Lantana, an annual in Ohio, is used as a shrub in Ecuador.

There are lots of reasons for this and one reason I suspect is the impact of invasive species. We are so much more aware of plants and pests that can become a major problem.

We are much more cautious (at least I hope we are!) about bringing new plant species to the United States without knowing much more and thinking about how it might react in our environment.

Unfortunately, good intentions sometimes go bad. Kudzu, for instance, was brought to the US as an erosion control. Multiflora rose was used as fence rows in farm fields.

We know the rest of the story with these plants.