

Cloud-covered mountains near Puli, central Taiwan. Vegetables, cut flowers and nursery stock are all grown in smallholdings and nurseries in the hills; oolong tea from the higher slopes is especially prized

In celebration of the forthcoming Taipei International Flora Exposition, Simon Garbutt gives a taste of Taiwan, where floriculture abounds and natural habitats vary from coastal mangroves to alpine meadows. Photography by Simon Garbutt

TAIWAN ON DISPLAY

THE FIRST EUROPEAN VISITORS to Taiwan, in 1544, were Portuguese sailors. They called it Ilha Formosa, beautiful island, and Formosa it was called for four centuries: 'Taiwan' is a relatively recent name change. Lying about 150km (90 miles) off the southeast coast of China, the island is just 394km (245 miles) long north to south. Its eastern flank rears abruptly from the Philippine Sea, forming jagged mountain ranges, around 275 peaks of which top 3,000m (9,842ft). This inaccessible, lush forest region has confined most of the population (predominantly Han Chinese) to lowland cities in the western third of the island.

It is the island's rich and varied flora that attracts horticultural interest. Despite extensive logging that felled almost all the camphor forests, more than 4,000 native plant species survive, a quarter of them endemic. *Pleione formosana* is a dainty terrestrial orchid, but less-well-known, hardy plants such as *Deutzia taiwanensis*, *Schefflera taiwaniana* and *Tetrapanax* from higher altitudes are coming into UK cultivation.

Taiwan's thriving 'tiger economy' is built on technology, but it also has a flourishing floricultural industry. It is the world's largest exporter of hybrid orchids – many of the plants in British supermarkets originate from here – and also grows vast numbers of cut flowers and pot plants for domestic and overseas markets. Despite having little or no room for gardens, Taiwanese city dwellers love flowers, growing ornamental plants, herbs and vegetables wherever they can. From Taipei in the north to Tainan in the south, I saw street corners, balconies

and rooftops crammed with containers.

Orchids abound, from tasteful cascades of pristine white *Phalaenopsis*, mirrored in the glittering marble of hotel lobbies, to massed, multicoloured *Oncidium* hybrids vying for attention with gaudy pots of 'lucky bamboo' bedecked in scarlet and gold for Chinese New Year.

The townspeople's longing for nature is partly assuaged by the many street trees giving welcome shade. Roundabouts and central reservations blaze with dazzling azaleas and bedding schemes, parks are plentiful and well-used, and traditional Chinese gardens offer places for quieter contemplation.

A new trend is for 'green walls'. All sides of the exterior of a tower-block in subtropical Taichung are clad in luxuriant growth for several storeys; above this, each balcony is planted as a horizontal band of a different colour.

In Taipei, lower walls of plants advertise the forthcoming Taipei International Flora Exposition, in which the RHS will participate (see box, right). One of the festival's aims is to improve our relationship with nature, but a taste of wilderness is never far away. Among the *Miscanthus*-clad mountainsides of Yangmingshan (one of the country's eight National Parks), I was captivated by fields of *Zantedeschia* occupying the crater of an extinct volcano and tree ferns waving in the chill spring air beneath delicate cherry blossom. The floral expo will be a great excuse for a visit, but the wild flora of this beautiful, and magnificently varied island, has its own particular elegance and charm. ■

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SOCIETY JOINS IN FLORA EXPO

Almost 92 hectares (230 acres) across four of the capital city's parks will be regenerated by the **2010 Taipei International Flora Exposition**, which runs from 6 November this year until 25 April 2011. Among exhibits from 36 countries, the RHS show garden, representing the UK, has been devised by landscape designer Michael Balston. Its eye-catching centrepiece will be a double helix 2.6m (8½ft) high, representing the structure of DNA, in celebration of the 350th anniversary of the Royal Society.

'From Isaac Newton to Stephen Hawking,' says Michael, 'Fellows of the Royal Society have expanded the boundaries of human knowledge and revolutionised the way we see the natural world and the universe. Sir Joseph Banks, an early President of the Royal Society, was also a founder of the London Horticultural Society, which later became the RHS.'

Although the garden will be planted with locally sourced trees and shrubs to withstand Taipei's climatic extremes, Michael hopes to include and show plants from UK breeders.

i Visiting Taiwan: for more on the expo, visit: www.2010taipeiexpo.tw/mp.asp?mp=4
 ● For more on the island and to plan a visit, see: www.go2taiwan.net

@ For more on the orchid-growing industry in Taiwan, see: www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Pots filled with bougainvillea in Tainan, the old capital. Gardens in front of the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial, Taipei. *Phalaenopsis* on display at SOGO Team's nursery. Flowering azaleas and a bridge in the park by Freedom Square, Taipei

