

## Facts about the Soufriere Tree



Flower cluster of the Soufriere tree, *Spachea elegans* (G. Meyer) Adr. Juss.

The flower of the Soufriere tree is officially recognized as the National Flower of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The botanical name of the tree is *Spachea elegans*, although it is often referred to as *Spachea perforata* (the latter name is actually a synonym). The tree belongs to the plant family Malpighiaceae, which is represented by a number of tropical and subtropical trees, shrubs and vines. The Barbados cherry (*Malpighia puniceifolia*) is one of the better-known plants in this family.

The Soufriere tree grows to 25 metres (80 feet) tall, and the small flowers are borne in pendent racemes (elongate flower clusters) about 5 to 8 centimetres (2 to 3 inches) long. A recent photo of the flower cluster of the tree (pictured above) appeared on the cover of the SVGAT 2007 Independence Banquet booklet.

The official website of the Government of St. Vincent and The Grenadines states the following:

“The Soufriere tree was reported to have been collected on the slopes of the volcano in 1804, i.e. before the 1812 eruption, by Dr. Alexander Anderson the then Medical Officer and Curator of the Gardens. An old specimen of the tree is still to be found in the Gardens along with a much younger tree about ten years old. The tree air layers quite readily and will root from cuttings also. But both trees at the Gardens have never fruited or set seed even though they flower profusely and the flowers are bisexual.”

The Government website also states that, “The outstanding feature of the Soufriere tree is that it is a purely endemic species known from Saint Vincent only and it has not been found in the wild since.”

However botanists recognize this species as a tree that is in fact native to Guyana, where fish eat the green, nutlike fruits. People fish under the tree or use the ripe fruits as bait. Richard Howard, in his six-volume work, FLORA OF THE LESSER ANTILLES states that the tree was introduced into St. Vincent from British Guiana in 1791.

*Fred Prescod*  
*Horticultural Educator*