

Hughie Jones - February 2018

Red Leaved Velvet Senecio
Senecio cristobalensis - Asteraceae
(*Roldana petasitis* ssp. *cristobalensis*)



This is the plant I saw when I was walking through the Black Garden. I stopped - or better yet it stopped me. I checked for a label - nothing. Luckily the gardener who had just planted it was nearby. It was 2012 and for the first time I was looking at red leaved velvet senecio (*Senecio cristobalensis*).

We are lucky to have this rare plant in VanDusen. And it is thanks to Dr. Dennis Breedlove, who collected it in the cloud forest surrounding San Cristobal de las Casas, a city in Mexico's southern most state Chiapas.

The New World Cloud Forest planting at San Francisco Botanical Garden (formerly Strybing) along with the Meso-American hillside at University of California Botanical Garden in Berkeley has served as a repository for the massive collecting efforts of Dr. Breedlove. He began work on the flora of Chiapas in the mid-1960s. The rich and varied flora in this area has been under pressure from human encroachment. In Chiapas today 90% of the cloud forest has been lost.

Dr. Breedlove brought back many plants alive, unusual for a botanist. His selections from high-elevation plant communities have been grown and unofficially tested for many years at SFBG, UCBG, a few private gardens, and some small, adventuresome nurseries. Many of these plants have shown outstanding horticultural potential but are as yet poorly known by gardeners and unavailable in the horticultural trade.

Senecio cristobalensis has been grown at SFBG since 1991. It grows as a shrub or giant herb from 1 to 5 metres (3 to 15 ft) in height. The colour of its daisy flowers vary from white to yellow in late fall and winter. Bold foliage and a vigorous habit mark this outstanding plant. A velvety down of purple-magenta hairs covers the underside of mature leaves (46 cm/18 in across), and all parts of the new leaves. The upper surface of mature leaves is of a rich green hue.

This plant requires regular watering and prefers bright shade. It can be cut back once or twice a year to maintain production of the colourful new foliage. Three red leaved velvet senecio first came to VanDusen nursery in 2009. Although hardy to about -6C (21F), *Senecio cristobalensis* is not kept out in winter.

Once I saw this plant in 2012, I couldn't wait to see it again in 2013. It always appears in different areas of the Black Garden and quietly waits for you to see it.



Dr. Dennis Breedlove

Today a rare cloud forest is alive and well and living in San Francisco because of the work of Dr. Breedlove, who died in 2012. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Breedlove, a botanist and curator at the California Academy of Sciences, began studying the plants and flowers of Chiapas. He collected specimens and brought back cuttings and seeds to San Francisco because he recognized the similarities in climate with Chiapas. "There are very few gardens on the planet that grow these plants," said Botanical Garden Curator Don Mahoney, who worked with Breedlove.

<https://www.sfbotanicalgarden.org/cf/pdf/daisies.pdf> - Cloud Forest Daisies: Horticultural Treasures of Montane Mexico by Martin Grantham and Bian Ta

<https://www.sjnd.org/news-and-events/news/post/legacy-botanist-dennis-breedlove-%E2%80%99957-san-francisco%E2%80%999s-mesoamerican-cloud>