

8/20/2010 Spiral Flag Ginger - TROPICAL DOME

The spiral flag ginger (*Costus magalobracteata*) is an amazing plant in the Tropical Dome that you may have passed by without noticing. Instead of growing upward as most plants do, the exotic foliage grows on stems that form a distinct spiral. The stems look very much like bamboo. If you are visiting at the right time, you also might see the beautiful flowers. Again, you'll have to look closely to really appreciate what you are seeing. The "flower" is really a group of flowers called an inflorescence. The red bracts grow in the form of a cone, and the individual flowers, often yellow, emerge out between the bracts. These attractive structures are grown for the floral industry because of their interesting form and long life after cutting.

The spiral flag ginger in the Tropical Dome is from Africa, but other species come from other tropical regions in South America and especially in Southeast Asia. The coat of arms of Nigeria features flowering spiral flag ginger plants. They are pictured because they are common and popular wildflowers there. The common name "spiral flag ginger" is used for a number of different plant species whose stems grow upward in a spiral. None of them can tolerate cold weather, so these plants are found only in greenhouses or tropical gardens. They are perennial plants that can grow 3 to 6 feet tall. The tubers or rhizomes that grow underground have been used for flavoring in cooking, but this is not the same plant that most of us know as "ginger." True ginger that is found in supermarkets is a different, but related plant, *Zingiber officinale*, native to China. Until recently, spiral flag ginger and true ginger were even in the same plant family, but the taxonomists have now separated them. The spiral flag ginger is worth looking for in the Tropical Dome at any time of the year.

The photo is *Costus productus*, a different species than we have in the Tropical Dome, but it shows the spiral shape of the bamboo-like stem and young inflorescences.

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