

## CHAPTER 3

### ROYAL ACCOLADES

#### OR HOW CHARLES PLUMIER DISCOVERED BEGONIAS.

Michel Begon, remembered in the name of the family *Begoniaceae*, was a distinguished French senior public administrator, a patron of the Arts and Sciences and greatly esteemed by King Louis XIV. He was, between 1682 and 1685, *Intendant* (or Governor) of the French Antilles, comprised of the Islands of Martinique, Guadeloupe and Saint Christophe. On his recall to France in 1682 he was, for a short time, *Intendant* of the Marseilles Galleys, a posting that he did not relish, and his appointment to the *Intendancy* of the important seaport and naval base of Rochefort in September of 1688 was no doubt a great relief, and indeed a significant promotion. It is to him that we are, indirectly, indebted for the discovery of the Begonia.

Louis XIV, the Sun King, reigned in France for 72 years from 1643 to 1715. He was, amongst many other things, an active patron of the Arts and Sciences. Botany was one of his many interests and in early 1688 he required Michel Begon, who at that point was *Intendant* of the Marseilles Galleys, to recommend a suitable person to undertake a plant collecting trip to the French Antilles.

The man Begon chose for the expedition was a physician and botanist, Francois Surian, who then selected as his assistant a Franciscan monk, Charles Plumier, who was skilled in botany and botanical illustration. They set out in 1690 and went about their botanical collecting in the plant-rich islands of the Caribbean. An unrecorded incident which strained the relationship beyond endurance resulted in Surian and Plumier parting company, but each carried on botanising. Surian's considerable manuscripts are held in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris, but it is Plumier who is best remembered for his discoveries, amongst which were six species of a hitherto unknown plant family which he called *Begonia* in honour of the man who had recommended Surian to King Louis XIV (see illustrations at the end of this chapter). It is reported that Plumier sent Begon many interesting plants during this first expedition, for Begon was an avid collector of items of a scientific or botanical nature. These gifts, and a continuing correspondence, resulted in Plumier coming under Begon's patronage for future expeditions. The *Begoniaceae* was officially recognised in 1700 by Joseph Pitton de Tournefort in his book '*Institutiones Rei Herbariae*' Vol I, and later by Carl Linnaeus in 1753 in his '*Species Plantarum*'.