



THE INTERNATIONAL PALM SOCIETY

Feb. 2022

NEWSLETTER

A Valentine's Day card to Libby Besse, a true IPS legend

by Andy Hurwitz



The International Palm Society's 2021 mid-term meeting in the greater Tampa/St. Petersburg area included a visit to Sarasota, Florida, and the home of Libby Besse. A true living legend, this remarkably spry nonagenarian and her son, Al, guided our group through her breathtaking garden, architectural home, and palm society lore. Needless to say, we were all smitten.

Libby and her family happily left the cold environs of the northern United States and settled in the greater Tampa area. Her beloved late husband Byron (affectionately called By), a radiologist, met International Palm Society President Dr. U.A. Young literally on the first day of work. Dr. Young encouraged the Besse's, already avid gardeners (roses), to pursue tropical horticulture, of course focusing on palms and cycads.

The Besse's, now with three young sons, began making day trips to Sarasota. In 1969, By stood in the street in front of an overgrown and impassable driveway and, literally to shock of everyone present, exclaimed "we'll take it!" He instantly knew that it would be an ideal site for their dream tropical garden. What he may not have initially known was the unseen boarded-up house was an architectural gem, designed in 1957 by acclaimed modernist and member of the Sarasota School of architecture, Victor Lundy (still alive today at age 98). Furthermore the 2-acre lot provided endless bayside views and a boathouse.



The boathouse surrounded by majestic Cuban palms

Libby Besse



And her neighbor's dock, (clearly with inspiration from Libby and By).

Libby joined the International Palm Society over a half century ago, attending her first biennial in Northern California in 1976. Her herculean efforts on behalf of our society were recorded in an interview conducted by former IPS President Ray Hernandez in 2015:

“Libby’s service to the IPS has spanned several decades. She served as a Board member of the IPS under seven presidents, much of that time as Secretary, a mixed job overseeing journal production, biennial planning, budgeting, membership listings, affiliate relations, bookstore management – and on two occasions served as Acting IPS treasurer. Looking back, Libby remembers her first use of email while planning a Sarasota IPS Director’s meeting in the mid-1990s, thanks to Jim Cain, who was promoting Genie, General Electric’s email, but she knew of no one else to send an email. She recalls the 1990 Hawaii biennial was a joint meeting with the International Aroid Society because Jules Gervais was president of both societies. In the late 1990s, it was Libby who proposed changing the journal’s name from *Principes* to *Palms*, provoking much controversy until the idea was strongly supported by Dr. John Dransfield.” (Ray Hernandez, interview with Libby Besse, IPS newsletter, 2015).

In recognition of her contributions to the IPS, she was bestowed our highest honor, the Dent Smith Award, presented to her in May, 2015. In fact, she is the most recent recipient of this prestigious award.

Remarkably, Libby sat on the boards of the International Palm Society, Montgomery Botanical Center, and Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden all concurrently. Somehow, she still found the time and energy to wholly dedicate herself to the newly formed Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota. (Editors note, the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens will be featured in next month’s newsletter)

Again, from Ray Hernandez’s interview: “In 1976 Sarasota opened the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens and Libby became their first Record Keeper, before the age of computers, recording details of incoming plant material on thousands of handwritten 3 x 5” cards. She later became Selby’s Herbarium Manager in the era when all boxes mailed overseas required the labels attached by string and no box to Russia could contain a printed newspaper. Along with her other Selby jobs, she became a plant explorer to the back-country of the tropics, collecting epiphytes for Selby.”

Libby Besse

All told, Libby has led a fascinating life. She attended summer camp with (pre-Princess) Grace Kelly via “Philadelphia connections” and graduated from Wellesley College. Her generosity with her time extended well beyond her botanical interests. Libby was a volunteer at Tampa General Hospital as well as the Newtown kindergarten, in a historically African-American community of Sarasota. Her reach goes back to the very founding of our society. Lucita Wait, the third member of the IPS, had fond memories of a voyage to the Seychelles during which she and Libby watched the sunset on Bird Island with its thousands of fairy terns (DeArmand Hull, *Principes*, 40(1), p. 42). At 94 years young, she remains remarkably active, walking a 1-mile loop three times every day. Al explained that she is facile with an iPhone and still, in his eyes, is “cutting edge,” essentially a “walking encyclopedia.” Clearly, Libby is our living legend.

The author wishes to acknowledge Ray Hernandez for his terrific interview with Libby, previously published in the IPS newsletter. The complete story may be accessed here: <http://palms.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/February2015.pdf>. I am especially grateful to her son, Al Besse (who not only guided us but put up with several calls and e-mails), for provided much of the content used in this tribute.

The international Palm Society Board of Directors, and IPS members, gathered around Libby Besse in her garden, Siesta Key, Florida. Libby is fourth from the left,



Libby Besse

Wandering through Libby's garden was awe inspiring. Time and time again seasoned veterans of the palm world were heard to proclaim: "that's a largest ___ I've ever seen." So instead of repeating this with each photograph, I'll simply place an * which denotes this.

A very mature (read huge) *Copernicia macroglossa** lacking its characteristic skirt. Dr. Larry Noblick providing scale.



Left: *Pseudophoenix sargentii** perhaps a bit stretched by the dense canopy of live oaks .
Below: *Zombia antillarum**



When asked about her favorite palm, Libby sees the beauty in them all: "I have no one favorite. In my garden I like *Zombia* both for its name and the rings of matting around its stems. I like the needles of *Aiphanes* and the bunches of red fruit on the *Wodyetia*. Probably the most fun palm is a *Corypha umbraculifera* where several of us can stand under a huge leaf to keep out of the rain."

Libby Besse



IPS members cavorting amongst the extra-large palms (*Hyphaene*) and cycads.



A large *Corypha* towering above (also large) cycads.

Kerriodoxa elegans.



Close up of characteristic black petioles and white leaf underside of *Kerriodoxa elegans*.



Libby Besse



IPS directors Ms. Glenn Franklin (left) and Jeffrey Brusseau (right) providing scale for two very large cycads (*Encephalartos* spp.).

Libby was the first to discover the true red tropical slipper orchid, *Phragmipedium besseae*, on a collecting trip in Ecuador in 1981. This exciting discovery, a botanical sensation, delighted the orchid community. Al explained: once at an international orchid symposium, her identity was revealed, and she received the “rockstar treatment.” Attendees crowded around her and asked her to autograph their programs, which of course Libby did in her typical modest and humble manner.



Of course, the coconut didn't fall far from the palm. Here's our gracious guide, Al Besse, with his namesake *Anthurium albesseae* in Ecuador in 1985. Photo courtesy of Al Besse.



An illustration of *Phragmipedium besseae* hangs in Libby's home.

Libby Besse



Planting palms is contagious! Libby's neighbor Bob Heaton has an admirable collection as well, including some beautifully grown *Copernicia macroglossa*, *Coccothrinax crinita* and *Chambeyronia (Kentiopsis) oliviformis*.

Copernicia fallaensis



Save the Date! IPS 2022 Biennial in Hawaii

The International Palm Society Hawaii Biennial: Sunday, October 9 through Saturday, October 15



During the last Biennial in Hawaii, in 2004, the IPS visited the Ho'omaluhia Botanical Garden, where Scott Zona photographed these massive (note the picnic table), but still young, talipot palms (*Corypha umbraculifera*). We wonder how much they've grown since then!

Past IPS Biennials

If you haven't been an IPS member, here's what you've been missing: Spectacular destinations with palms in the wild, private & public palm gardens, expertly guided tours, and the fellowship of palm-nuts from all over the world.

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| 1958 Miami, FL, USA | 1990 The Big Island, HI, USA |
| 1960 Miami, FL, USA | 1992 Miami, FL, USA |
| 1962 Miami, FL, USA | 1994 Caracas, Venezuela |
| 1964 Arcadia, CA, USA | 1996 Orange Co., CA, USA |
| 1966 Miami, FL, USA | 1998 Bangkok & Nong Nooch, Thailand |
| 1968 Arcadia, CA, USA | 2000 New Caledonia |
| 1970 Melbourne, FL, USA | 2002 French & Italian Riviera & Naples, France & Italy |
| 1972 Mexico City, Mexico | 2004 Oahu & The Big Island, HI, USA |
| 1974 Miami, FL, USA | 2006 Dominican Republic |
| 1976 Melbourne, FL, USA | 2008 Costa Rica |
| 1978 California, USA | 2010 Rio de Janeiro, Brazil |
| 1980 The Big Island, HI, USA | 2012 Nong Nooch, Thailand |
| 1982 Tampa, Miami & Key West, FL, USA | 2014 Miami & Key West, FL, USA |
| 1984 San Francisco, CA, USA | 2016 Borneo (Sarawak, Malaysia) & Singapore |
| 1986 San Diego, CA, USA | 2018 Colombia |
| 1988 Queensland, Australia | 2020 Reunion. Cancelled due to COVID-19 pandemic |

***Pritchardia* in Hawaii**

Once again, I am pleased to re-introduce Don Hodel to our newsletter audience. Don is the world's acknowledged expert on the genus *Pritchardia*. This is the second species in the on-going series focusing on Hawaii's only native palm genus, *Pritchardia*. We hope that this will serve as a field guide of sorts and aid in the identification and differentiation of the various species that we might encounter during the Hawaii Biennial.

Pritchardia* in Hawaii: *Pritchardia bakeri

Pritchardia bakeri, endemic to O'ahu and named for the late Ray Baker of Lyon Arboretum, who assembled and expertly curated one of the greatest collections of tropical plants, including palms, is unique among Hawaiian *loulou* for a combination of its inflorescences greatly exceeding the leaves and large fruits. It occurs at both ends of the Ko'olau Mountains behind Honolulu, as here along the Pūpūkea Summit Trail at the north end of the range. Photos by D. R. Hodel.



***Pritchardia* in Hawaii**



Parting Shot

The palm-nuts are getting restless, eager for travel to palm rich gardens and habitats! We hope that you will join us for the Hawaii Biennial in October. Photo: *Mauritia flexuosa*, trimmed leaf remnant.

HAPPY VALENTINES DAY!

