

Interview: Libby Besse by Ray Hernandez

In November of last year, IPS Director Kim Cyr asked me to interview Libby Besse for the online IPS newsletter. I was delighted at the opportunity to have a one-on-one meeting with one I consider to be a living legend in the palm world. Here was a name I'd held in reverence since my early palm growing days. Along with Dent Smith, Dr. Jerome Keuper and Dr. U.A. Young, Libby and By were palm growing pioneers in Central Florida. They'd seen tropical storms, hurricanes and freezes, and through trial and error, became familiar with the Florida soil and learned what would and would not grow in their garden. Complementing the technical and scientific information, this was the everyday Joe's home cultivation side of the Palm Society. It is Libby and the others like her that gave the Palm Society, now the International Palm Society, its most fundamental "roots".

On a cool January Florida day, my wife, daughter and I made the one-hour trek from Tampa to Libby's home on Siesta Key. I'd been to Libby's garden a few times before but



At home in Siesta Key, Sarasota, Florida, Libby chats with Ray Hernandez.

like any great private or public garden, you always see something new with each subsequent visit. Upon entering the property, you first notice the incredibly old live oak canopy that Libby has kept intact for 46 years. Under the canopy are many species of palms and cycads with a few aroids and bromeliads carefully interspersed throughout the garden. Libby will tell you that when left unchecked, the canopy becomes so dense it limits palm growth; regular pruning ensures enough light gets through for the more sun-loving specimens. The long driveway traverses half of her property and leads to Libby's classic mid-century home on the bay. It's here where she and I discussed some of her past accomplishments, IPS history, and ideas to help retain a solid membership in future years. Libby grew up near Hershey, Pennsylvania, and also spent short stints in Utah, Minnesota and Washington –always gardening –before she and her family moved to Tampa in 1959. Soon Libby, with her longtime husband By and their three sons, were spending weekends exploring Florida, visiting its parks and gardens, and enjoying their new subtropical home. There were many picnics; even a Christmas dinner picnic with a turkey packed in a cooler, gravy in a thermos and, what else, a Hershey bar dessert for a Pennsylvanian.



By met Dr. U.A Young on his first day of work in Tampa: “You should grow palms”, he said, and invited the Besses to his garden and sent them home with a starter set of palm species. Then in 1969 Libby and By moved to the warmer climate of Sarasota’s Siesta Key, and now with two acres, they began searching nurseries, acquiring seeds, and planting every palm and cycad species they could find. Almost half a century later, it’s a garden of mature plants.

Libby joined the Palm Society shortly after it was founded and attended most of their annual meetings, first in Florida and sometimes in California. In 1976 Sarasota opened the Marie Selby Botanical Garden 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; when 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. She travelled extensively throughout Central and South America, to Borneo, Malaysia and Australia, and to Southern Africa, giving her the opportunity to see numerous palm species growing in their native habitats.



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Libby served on the Marie Selby board of directors as well as that of Montgomery Botanical Center and Fairchild Botanical Garden. Fairchild has long been the center of palm activity for Floridians with its extensive palm collection and outstanding botanical and horticultural staff, and is known for its garden sales where home growers can acquire rare palm species. It was at Fairchild that early palm enthusiasts came together to form the Palm Society more than 50 years ago. Dent Smith of northern Florida was its founder and *Principes* editor; Dr. Hal Moore of Cornell provided botanical expertise while Lucita Wait from Miami served as first Secretary. Within a few years, California began hosting meetings, and in 1988, Palm Society President Ed McGehee took the group to Australia – the beginning of the International Palm Society.

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 no one else to send an email to. 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 till the idea was strongly supported by Dr. John Dransfield. All of this dedication led to Libby being presented with the distinguished Dent Smith Award at the South Florida Biennial this past May. While honored, Libby believes this award was unjustifiably given to her. She believes her accomplishments came from a team of dedicated people and that she could not have accomplished the same things alone.

Libby sees the need for planning the future of the IPS, for its need to adapt to changing times. She strongly believes that increased membership should be a primary goal. She suggests that some of the IPS board meetings and biennials become more accessible to members by locating them in less expensive, easily accessible locations in Florida, California and Australia. She likes the concept of ecotourism to exotic palm localities for which there seems to be popular demand and which would provide additional income for the society.

Libby, now in her 80's, is as strong as ever and continues her involvement in the IPS, albeit from afar. She continues to actively garden and hopes freezes like that of 1983 and 1989, so devastating to many tropical palm species, never repeat again. It's good to know Libby's watchful eye still has the pulse of the IPS. Her perspective on where the Society has been is essential if it is to succeed in the 21st century. ♦

HIGHLIGHTS from the 2014 Biennial in Florida

original photography by Peter Timmermans



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