

**“Ready For A Garden Tour?”  
Jim Wright, Lifetime Palm Enthusiast,  
died August 8, 2015, aged 73**



“Are you ready for a garden tour?” For those of us who visited Jim Wright at his home in San Diego, this question is most certainly at the forefront of our memories of him.

Jim spent untold hours watering, pruning, potting, planting, raking, cleaning and fertilizing his yard. Caring for his palm garden was his life’s work, but when visitors arrived,

it was a chance for him to relax and enjoy the changes, the growth and the beauty of his plants. For a small price of admission – he always required that you added your name and date to his guestbook – you were invited to join him at his side in a stroll through the garden.

Our friend Jim grew up in the Normal Heights neighborhood of San Diego. As a teenager, he developed an interest in plants and reptiles. He began keeping rattlesnakes as pets. His mother did not share his fascination with this pastime and asked him to move out. Upon starting work, Jim bought his first and only house in the Bay Park area above Mission Bay in 1964.

He worked for over 30 years at Scripps Institute of Oceanography in La Jolla. He was a lab technician in the Physiology Department doing research on aquatic mammals. Most studies he was involved in were focused on how these animals could survive periods of asphyxia underwater so as to understand why human newborns can go without oxygen for up to 8 minutes. He would work with trained seals, penguins in Antarctica, sharks and sheep. People asked him where he had earned his PhD. They were often shocked when he told them he had only a high school education.

At his new home, he developed an interest in palms. Never a shy person, he quickly discovered who the local experts were and requested an introduction. Jim's mentors were charter International Palm Society members Ed Moore and Jim Specht. Ed was one of the first palm hobbyists in Southern California and a volunteer at the San Diego Zoo. Jim learned palm horticulture from his first-hand experience with these experts.

Jim also became very involved in the Palm Society of Southern California and the International Palm Society. He attended PSSC meetings and several IPS Biennials for more than 40 years and held board member and officer positions. He contributed greatly to the success and growth of both organizations.

One of his earliest plantings in the new garden was *Rhopalostylis sapida*. It was quite rare at the time. This palm became his trademark where they dominated the skyline in his neighborhood. Jim especially loved the small understory palms like *Chamaedorea geonomiformis* and *Linospadix monostachya*. A hybrid *Chamaedorea glaucifolia* × *klotzschiana* that he created was officially named *Chamaedorea* Jim Wright. He always kept *Palms of Madagascar*,

*Encyclopedia of Cultivated Palms* and the latest issue of PALMS next to his reading chair and would look at them nearly every day.

Jim was uniquely aware of his surroundings while he walked the pathways of his garden petting his beard. No matter how many people had joined him for the tour, he would notice if you stopped to study a particular plant. "What do you see there?" he would call out over the heads of several others in a booming voice. Then he would break away from the front of the group and join you in your inspection. "Isn't that a beauty?" He would loudly proclaim and enthusiastically discuss the palm in question and its entire history. Each palm was cared for as one of his children.

The garden tour always included a stop at the potting benches along the back fence. He was known by his palm friends as "One Gallon Jim" because he only bought small palms and raised them himself. He grew many others from his own seeds. There was always a crop of *Chamaedorea ernesti-augusti* and many other experimental palms on his benches. Jim was a true grower.

He was not only an expert in palms. Jim was extremely knowledgeable about orchids and bromeliads. He was very active in these plant societies as well as the San Diego Horticultural Society. Jim was always participating in orchid shows, giving horticultural talks, hosting meetings and having open garden tours.

As a natural extension of gardening, Jim was also fascinated by the weather. He loved the rain. He would call friends living in other areas of San Diego and the country to ask about any storms. He dreamed of being in the middle of a hurricane or a tornado. If you had just returned from a trip to an exotic place, oddly, the first thing he would ask was if it had rained. He kept meticulous notebooks of daily temperature and precipitation records for San Diego and Miami going back to the 1970s.

He was an entirely free-thinking person with a unique perspective. Visitors were always made well aware that Jim was an avid environmentalist. He took baths and saved the water to fill his toilet. Guests were expected to do the same. If you looked in his kitchen drawers, they were filled with the unused paper napkins left on tables at restaurants thinking it was wasteful that rules required them to be thrown out. When he went to other people's garden parties, he would carry a plate, cup and fork with him since he was very opposed to the

wastefulness of using disposable dinnerware. And Styrofoam was strictly off-limits! His refrigerator was covered with newspaper clippings about our warming climate, pet cats killing song birds, polluting gas-guzzler cars and many other personal causes.

Jim was a funny person with a sophomoric sense of humor. When touring a garden, one of his favorite tricks was to casually toss a handful of trash into a planter to see the garden owner's reaction. He also loved to scare people by falling down in the middle of a crosswalk, then jumping up laughing when they stopped to help. In his early years, he would drive around with a dummy next to him in the car. One time he went a little too far by climbing 16 floors with that dummy to the top of the El Cortez Hotel in downtown San Diego and throwing it from the rooftop onto the street.

Jim had three children with his first wife Susan – Steve, Stacy and Jeff. She was very supportive of his palm passion, and they always stayed close friends. His second wife Lise Rasmussen-Wright was his soulmate. They were married in 1985. They shared a love of gardening. Lise was an expert rose and daylily grower. When she was diagnosed with leukemia, Jim did extensive fundraising for the Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia Society and was awarded the “CLL Man of the Year” in 2012 for his commendable fund-raising efforts.

As the years passed by and his garden grew and filled in, Jim began to run out of space in his yard. When his friends would try to give him a new palm, and he would say “I’m pretty well maxed out.” Next, he would ask how big it would get (not even considering it would take at least 50 years to attain that size). Luckily the house next door to him came up for sale. He purchased it as a rental and used the backyard to further expand his own garden. He

added a lath house for his orchids and tillandsias. The tour always required a stop to see what was blooming there.

Outside of the lath house was a tree filled with hummingbird feeders. Jim had a specific sugar mixture and special feeders hanging all around his backyard. He kept busy making sure these were always full for his flying friends. Below the feeders was milkweed grown for attracting Monarch butterflies. Visitors who would pause for a moment and hold still in this area would quickly be surrounded with swarms of hummingbirds and butterflies that took refuge in his garden.

While on a garden tour with Jim there was never any pressure to learn the proper Latin names or to have any familiarity with these plants. He loved newcomers. Rather, his boisterous enthusiasm over a new leaf, an inflorescence or some seed brought on a gradual change in your mindset. His interest was infectious. Jim introduced hundreds of people over the span of fifty plus years to the gardening of palms, orchid and bromeliads. And, if he was not giving tours of his own garden, he was going around looking at other gardens. He knew just about every palm growing in San Diego County.

By the end of your time with Jim touring his garden, the stresses and problems of the day were trivial irritations consigned to an insignificant corner of your consciousness. He said, “This garden has kept me alive and gave meaning to my life.”

It was an honor to know you, Jim. Thank you for showing us the wonders as well as the simple joys to be experienced in any garden. We will always remember strolling with you on your garden tours – *Randy and Cindy Moore, San Diego, California, on behalf of his palm friends around the world.*