

Healing a Valley with Open Palms

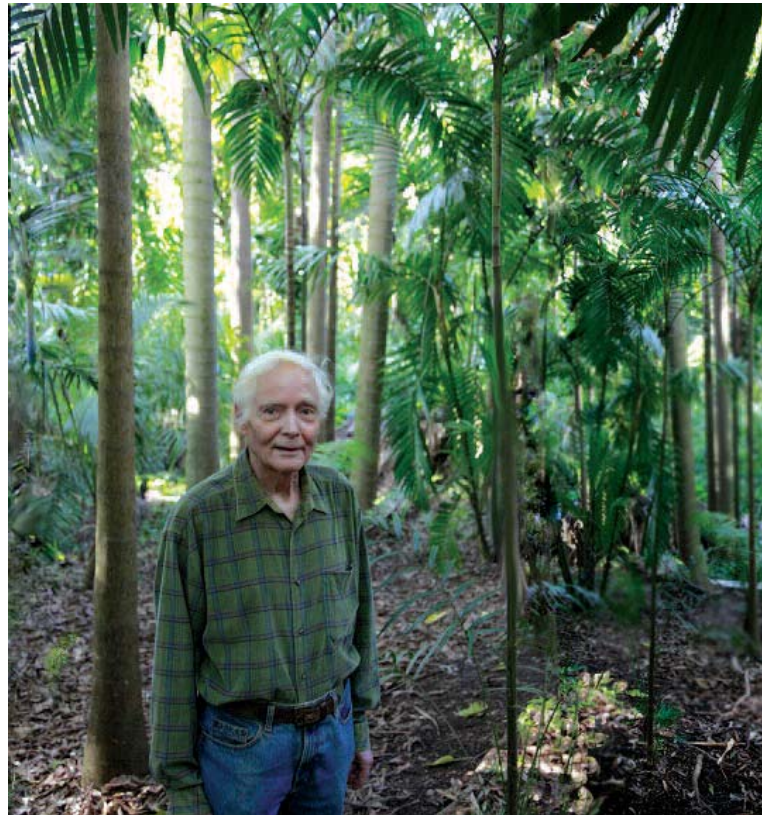
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1. William S. Merwin among his palms.

Among the many iconic images associated with Hawaii is the palm tree – most frequently depicted as a coconut palm darkened to a black silhouette arched in defiance of gravity against a fiery pink sunset. *Cocos nucifera* (the coconut palm), however, is not native to the Hawaiian Islands, having been introduced by the first Polynesian voyagers perhaps more than one thousand years ago.

Owing to its extreme isolation – some 2400 miles from the nearest land mass – Hawaii's flora includes fewer than 25 endemic palm species, all in the genus *Pritchardia*. Thanks to

one palm-loving resident, there exists a small valley on Maui's north shore that has been infused with a rich diversity of palms one could only imagine if combined in a fantastic



2. Paula and William S. Merwin in front of their home.

amalgam of Madagascar, South America and the Malesian biogeographic region spanning Southern Thailand to New Guinea.

And while the founder of this refuge keeps mostly to the 19-acre forest he and his wife Paula have built together, he is hardly anonymous. He is none other than William S. Merwin, celebrated U.S. poet laureate, two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, prolific writer of prose and verse and distinguished man of letters. William Merwin, author of close to 60 books of poetry, drama and translations, began his remarkable palm forest after coming to Hawaii to study Zen Buddhism in the 1970s.

Merwin's collection, which he started with Hawaiian *Pritchardia*, today has more than 2740 identified individual palms representing over 400 species and 128 genera including such wonders as *Johannesteijsmannia altifrons*, *Actinokentia divaricata* and *Hyophorbe indica*.

While living in the south of France in the 1960s, Merwin read about soil restoration and decided that if he were ever to own land, he wanted property in need of healing care. In 1976, while visiting Hawaii, Merwin was invited by a friend to Maui, where he was

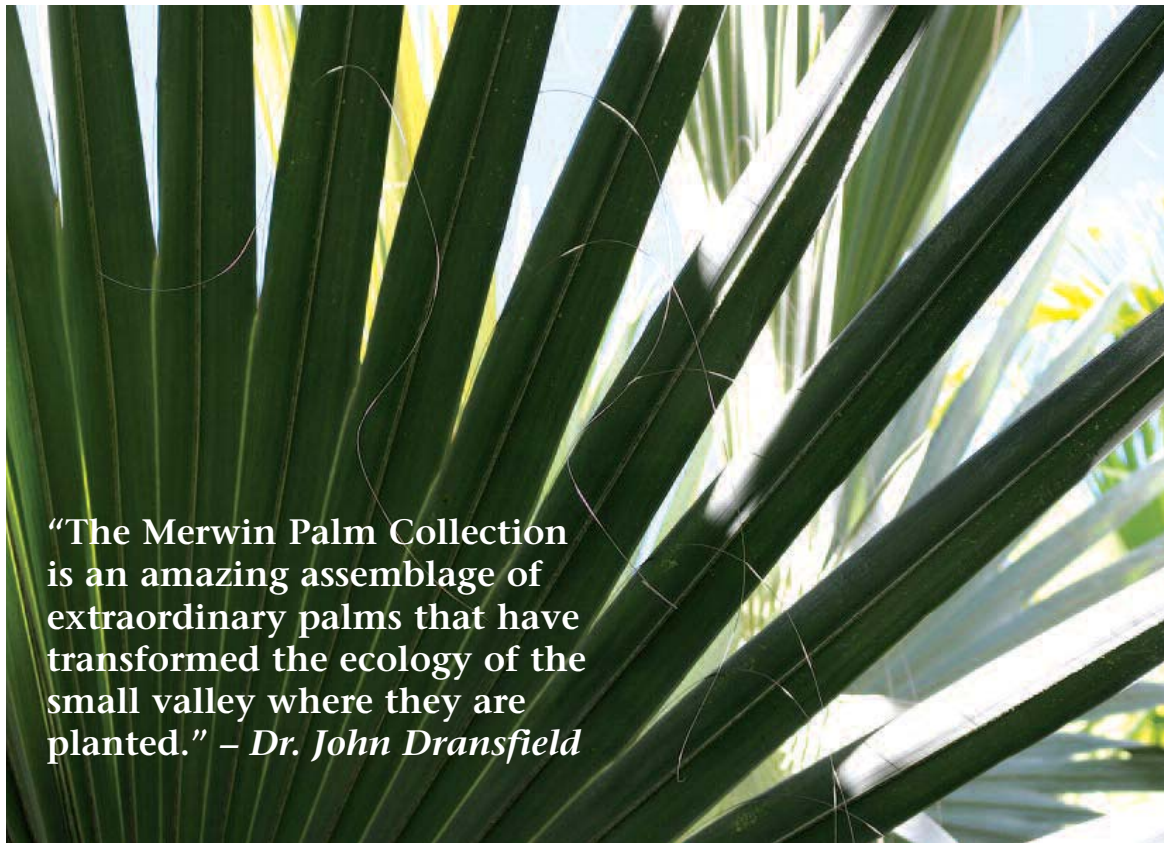
captivated by the island and where fate delivered him to just such a place. On a hardpan valley ridge scarred by abandoned pineapple fields, a land that had been so misused most thought nothing could grow there, Merwin first planted a windbreak of ironwood trees (*Casuarina equisetifolia*), which, years later, left him an 18-inch deep gift of rich, black top soil.

Over the next four decades Merwin and Paula spent most of their days gathering and planting seeds, nurturing the land and assembling a forest. Reflecting on the valley they transformed together, Merwin says it is the trees themselves that have reinvigorated the soil, not any chemical additives. Those first *Pritchardia*, many grown from seed, were raised on a simple diet of seaweed, manure and compost.

During the 1980s and 90s, as Maui's human population grew and development swallowed more land, the Merwins were quietly tucked away in their valley, as Paula put it, "[with] our heads down...working, weeding, planting" and collecting palms from all over the world. By the 2000s the valley had been dramatically transformed into a dense, green tropical forest.



3. The palm forest: *Kerriodoxa elegans* grows luxuriantly.



“The Merwin Palm Collection is an amazing assemblage of extraordinary palms that have transformed the ecology of the small valley where they are planted.” – Dr. John Dransfield

What began as one man’s dream based on a simple love of trees and the desire to reinvigorate a depleted valley, has grown into a world-class collection that was institutionalized as the Merwin Conservancy in 2010, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to perpetuating the work, vision and legacy of W.S. Merwin.

In April 2015, Merwin was awarded the prestigious Good Steward Award by the national Arbor Day Foundation for his tree planting and land stewardship work. In response, the poet said, “It seems somehow surprising to be honored for what has been a lifelong pleasure.”

On a small, perch-like lanai off his home, Merwin offers a guest tea and speaks lovingly of the surrounding palms, almost in a whisper, as a Brazilian cardinal flits between the fronds in flashes of red and gray. And while the collection includes many rare, threatened and endangered species, Merwin worries about having enough genetic material to safeguard some of the rarest palms. “Having one tree of a species – there’s a *Rhopaloblaste ceramica* (from Indonesia) out there – I haven’t saved that species,” he says. “I only have *one* tree. I have no genetic material at all, and it seldom drops seed... A species is not one tree.”

Not Just Another Garden

The Merwin collection is not laid out like a botanical garden. Rather it is more closely modeled on the conditions of a rainforest. The varied topography and elevation of the valley allow for palms to be planted in drier or wetter areas depending on their needs. Merwin concedes the valley does not offer ideal conditions for every species, but says he has “been lucky” to have had success growing such a broad representation of the *Arecaceae*.

For years Merwin planted a tree nearly every day, though as he approaches his 88th birthday, planting is no longer a daily ritual. When he does plant a new tree, he uses black volcanic cinders, old horse manure compost and organic 4-4-4 fertilizer mixed together with about one-third of the original soil adding a heavy mulch of half-rotted wood chips.

Over the past twelve years the Merwins have worked closely with Olin Erickson who today serves as the collections’ manager and head gardener, supervising half a dozen or so groundskeepers.

Palm Readers

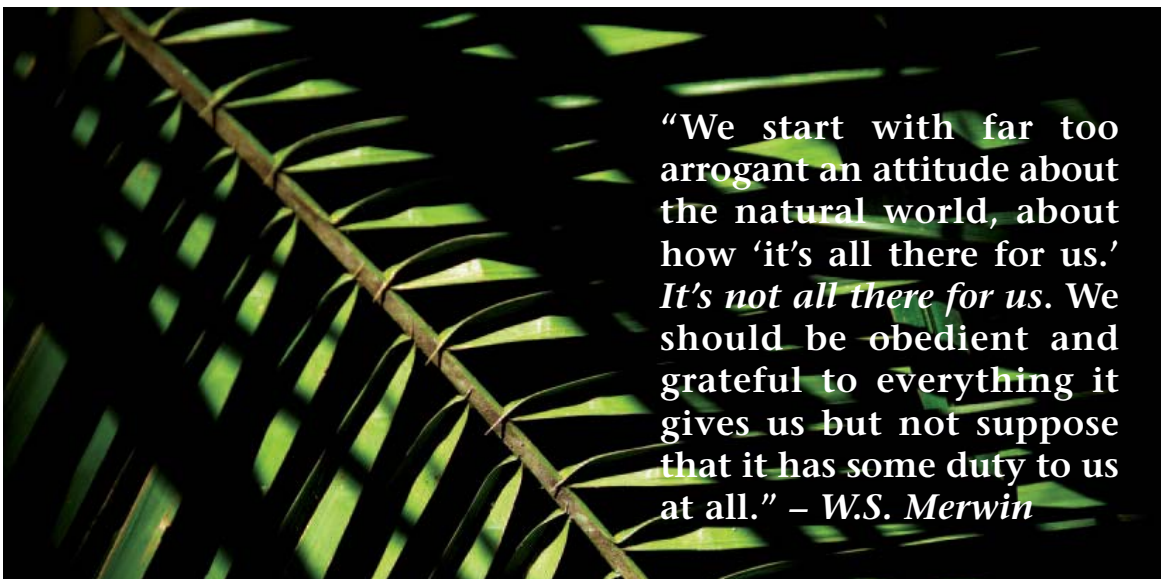
In 2012, the Merwin Conservancy sought the assistance Dr. John Dransfield, previously the



4. Another view of the palm forest showing the bewildering array of palms

head of palm research at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, to visit the collection for the purpose of identifying and cataloguing the nearly 3000 living trees growing in the valley. Dransfield accepted the invitation and, during two visits over a one-year period, collaborated with staff from the Kauai-based National Tropical Botanical Garden (NTBG) to identify, label and plot the collection.

Delighted to escape a bitterly cold British winter for the milder climes of Hawaii, Dransfield nonetheless found the job of identifying so many palms an enormous task. In the process, Dransfield and NTBG staff confirmed the identity of hundreds of species from around the world. Because they were growing in varying states of maturity, it added to the challenge of differentiating between



"We start with far too arrogant an attitude about the natural world, about how 'it's all there for us.' *It's not all there for us.* We should be obedient and grateful to everything it gives us but not suppose that it has some duty to us at all." – W.S. Merwin



5. Collections Manager Olin Erickson examines a mature *Areca vestiaria*.

what are often only subtly different species, sometimes without flowers or fruits.

Dransfield explained that because so many palms had been successfully grown in such high density, the trees frequently appeared as they would in the wild rather than in a

botanical garden setting, and because of the steep slopes, occasional wind and rain and a voracious mosquito population, the job was formidable.

Once the forest was mapped to the meter with GPS coordinates, numbered and labeled, the



6. Stilt-rooted *Socratea exorrhiza*.

2741 individual trees that include more than 400 species and 128 genera, were vouchered, accessioned and recoded in a permanent database (viewable online) to ensure the collection's integrity.

To see so many different species elsewhere, one would have to commit to weeks, if not months, of globetrotting. Dransfield says the value of the collection is in its extraordinary diversity and the fact that one can see palms from around the world growing much as they would in the wild.

In NTBG's final 2014 report, it described The Merwin Conservancy as having assembled "one of the largest known [private] palm collections" estimated to include a minimum of 407 species and varieties and possibly as many as 486. The report also offered a number of recommendations for maintaining optimum conditions and ensuring certain aggressive species are not allowed to naturalize and become invasive.

Looking to the Future

Merwin Conservancy Executive Director Jason Denhart says the organization is not only committed to preserving the Merwins' decades of work but also expanding the palm sanctuary and eventually transforming the Merwin residence (built within the forest) into a center for research and literature that will one day

serve as a retreat for poets and authors to imagine, create and write.

Since the autumn of 2014, the Conservancy has partnered with the Hawaiian Islands Land Trust to enforce a perpetual conservation easement protecting the property from any future development. Additionally, the Merwins have willed their entire property, the land, the palm collection and their unassuming low-slung jungle home to the Conservancy to be used one day as a place of inspiration and creativity. Merwin hopes that in the future botanists and others who know and appreciate palms can see the trees growing in a forest-like setting. In the decades ahead, the Merwin Conservancy wants students to use the collection for studying botany, horticulture and other related topics.

The Conservancy is nearly three-quarters of the way to achieving a one-million dollar fundraising effort that will establish a reserve fund to secure the future of the palms. This fund will help manage and maintain the Merwin's property for at least two decades during which time its value as a curated scientific collection and extraordinarily thoughtful space created in the name of beauty, and with the deepest reverence for nature and life itself, will only deepen and multiply. Learn more about the Merwin Conservancy at www.merwinconservancy.org.



"The [Merwin Collection] is particularly impressive because of the bewildering variety of palms, densely planted to form a forest." – Dr. John Dransfield



7. Looking up through the palm canopy.