

Recollections of Palm Collecting

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Since I was asked to contribute something written in a personal vein to this issue of *PRINCIPES*, which is mainly about the Fairchild Tropical Garden and its palms, I have here set down a few brief comments to serve by way of preface or preamble to the founding of the Garden.

Robert H. Montgomery and I were married in 1934, soon after he had established his winter home in South Florida. We spent every winter there until his death in 1953. Even though I had lived in Florida nearly all my life I did not know there were any palms except the coconut, the royal, the Washingtonia, and the cabbage (*Sabal Palmetto*). Every day before lunch we took a walk over our place and I began to get interested in my husband's new hobby, collecting palms. At that time we had shiny new aluminum labels on all our palms. The Latin names seemed long and complicated and very hard to pronounce. Dr. Fairchild always teased me about my pronunciation of them. We practised on a few new ones each day, and before long they became like old friends and we began to teach our friends and guests the botanical names. Years later I brought Mr. Jennings' children down for spring vacation and we decided to have a contest with cash prizes for the child who learned the most names. We delayed having the examination until we were in the Miami airport. Suddenly a man stuck his head out of a telephone booth and said, "Say, lady, what language are those children speaking?"

In 1951 Mr. Montgomery and I sailed on the S.S. Caronia on a round-the-world cruise, chiefly to visit some of the old and renowned botanical gardens where

we hoped to collect some new palms for our own place and for the Fairchild Tropical Garden. We found that it had paid to learn the Latin names, for often that was the only way we could communicate with some of the people we met in the various gardens. We sent back large quantities of seeds, and later on many of the young plants resulting were distributed to members of the Fairchild Tropical Garden. The Caronia was not crowded that year, due to the Korean war. We were given an extra stateroom and bath to house some of our living plants. Our stewardess was very good, and helped me keep the things watered. She called it my "tropical garden."

We had a permit from the U. S. Department of Agriculture to bring in palm seeds, but not living palms. To my sorrow a fine specimen of *Erythea armata* given to me by the Director of the botanical garden in Alexandria, Egypt, had to be destroyed on the New York docks. I found upon getting back to Florida that we had a good specimen growing right there, so all was well.

We found that many of the botanic gardens did not have the *Adonidia Merrillii*, named in honor of our good friend Dr. Elmer D. Merrill. The name is now *Veitchia Merrillii*. I know that Dr. Merrill would deplore the change from the generic name *Adonidia*, for it had pleased him very much. We sent many palm seeds back to our friends, hoping that some of them would grow into flourishing plants.

When we visited the wonderful old botanic garden in Singapore we noticed a very large "double coconut" or "coco de mer" (*Lodoicea maldivica*) with fruit. When I asked the Director where

he had gotten the seed, he laughed and said that he had helped to expedite a cask of the nuts through customs and quarantine in Singapore and that my husband had rewarded him with one of the nuts! Unfortunately our two specimens, grown from nuts that came in that same cask, are very slow-growing and seem to have a hard time surviving our chilly winters. Apparently the truly tropical climate of Singapore is more like the climate of the Seychelles Islands habitat than that of Coral Gables, Florida.

We had on our place a large fan palm, with grayish foliage, that we considered the handsomest one we had. The seed came to us from Madagascar under the name *Medemia nobilis*. We were very proud of the palm and always took our visitors to see it. Mr. and Mrs. John W. Galbreath liked it so much that they named one of their thoroughbred horses "Medemia!" The palm is dioecious, and when our tree matured we found it to be a male. We heard that there was a female palm of this same species, which we now know as *Bismarckia nobilis*, at the nearby U. S. Plant Introduction Garden, Chapman Field. By arrangement our superintendent Ray Vernon took pollen from our palm to Chapman Field, where it was used to fertilize the pistillate flowers of the palm there. In due course a number of viable seeds were produced and shared

with us. We have mature fruiting-size palms from that "marriage." They grow very fast in our lowland area. *Bismarckia nobilis* is being widely distributed now and in South Florida is no longer considered rare. It is, rare or not, an impressive and beautiful palm.

Mr. Montgomery started collecting conifers in Greenwich, Connecticut, and palms in Florida as a hobby. That hobby led to the founding of the Fairchild Tropical Garden in 1938. I would like to quote from his autobiography, "Fifty Years of Accountancy," published in 1939. Referring to the Fairchild Tropical Garden he wrote, "At last I have tackled a job the outcome of which I cannot foresee. I pray that the Garden may bring peace and happiness and a sense of beauty to millions of people. I pray that the Garden will be an inspiration to countless numbers who will be led to adopt a hobby which will never let them down."

I wish that he and Dr. Fairchild could see all that has been accomplished since their deaths. We who help to direct the destinies of the Garden are grateful to untold numbers of friends for their support and interest. We need their help now more than ever before because of the greatly expanded activities in scientific research and in the visual aspects of the Garden considered apart from its botanical importance as a garden for all to enjoy.