

COLLECTOR'S CHOICE

A Very Special Livistona

Your favorite palm? Perhaps you know which one it is, and why it is, without pausing to give it a moment's consideration. Seemingly it should be very easy to name that superlative palm and also to dash off a few telling sentences for publication, if requested, to a total of about five hundred words. But when such a request was made of me just recently, I was at first pretty well perplexed and very much surprised to find out there would be some difficulty in making a choice. All God's chillun got wings, and there's the rub. The difficulty stems from admiring too many palms and not actively disliking any of them.

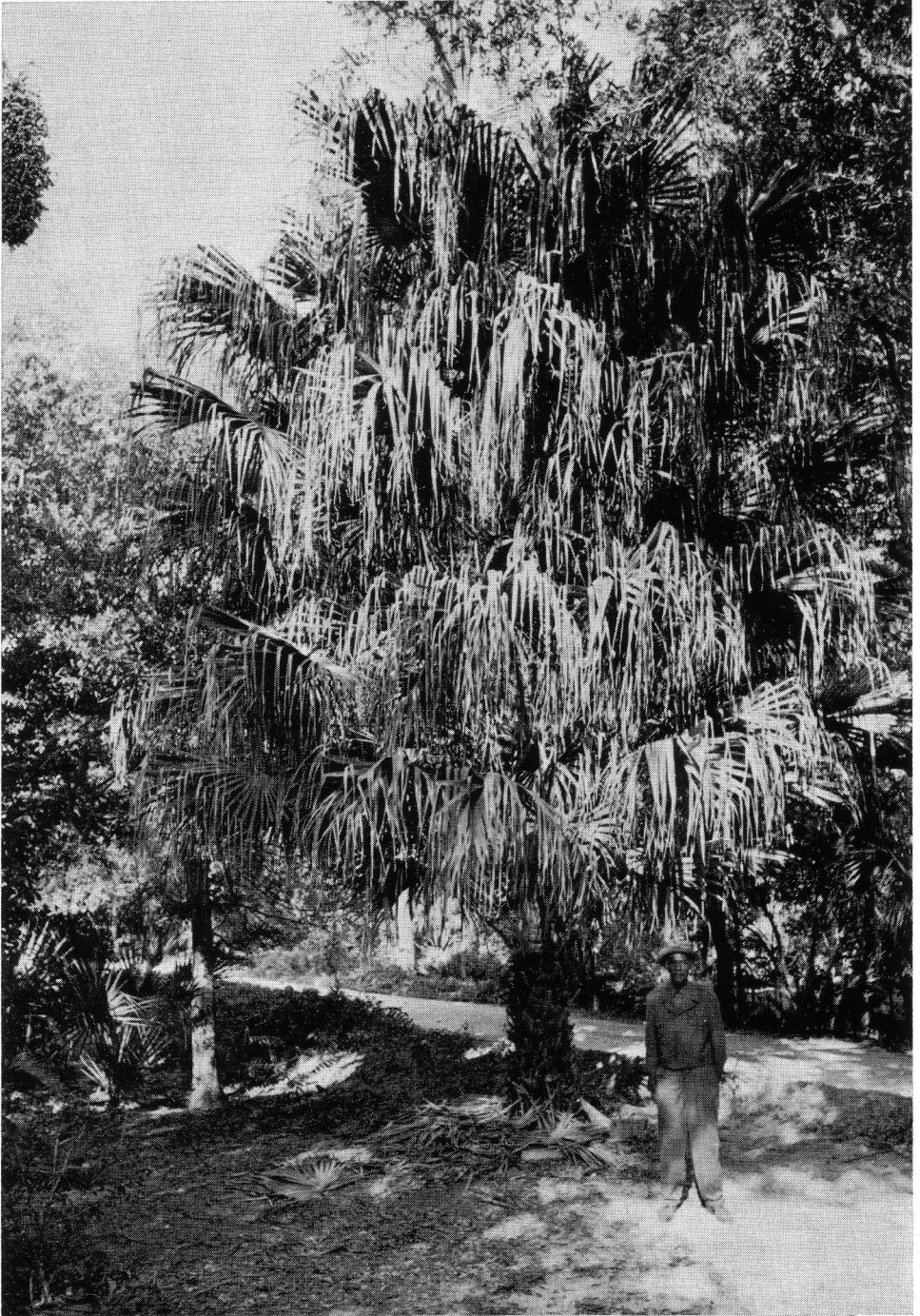
Any question about a choice, I had thought, could be resolved readily enough by electing the *Phoenix rupicola*, often called the handsomest species of its genus; or the *Licuala grandis*, a little honey of a palm; or the *Jubaea chilensis*, a honey palm but massive, not little; or the *Roystonea oleracea*, the *Rhyticocos amara*, the *Cyrtostachys Lakka*, or David Fairchild's special love, the *Pigafetta filaris*; or any other chosen from an elegant infinitude. Upon examining the matter, however, it was clear it would not be easy to find compelling reasons for putting one palm above all the others. Besides it would hardly be cricket to single out a palm I had never so much as glimpsed unless in an illustration—an Andean wax palm, for example, perhaps towering to nearly two hundred feet. Of course there was the temptation to buck the trend and be different by naming the lowly, and usually scrubby, saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*), or something even less distinguished, the *Sabal Etonia*, which will never win a beauty contest.

With some reluctance, however, I

passed up the opportunity to gain notoriety as a sort of James Joyce of the palm world, whose gibberish would be highly respected because nobody could understand it.

I had to make a choice and stop floundering around, so I decided to confine it to the palms that are growing on my own grounds. I would look at them all again, for about the billionth time, but more objectively than ever before, and then make a decisive choice. This I proceeded to do, and it seemed to me that one stands out above the crowd of about a thousand competitors here and is by all odds, if not the prettiest or most elegant, the most majestic in appearance.

This majesty of a palm belongs to the genus *Livistona*, though its species is uncertain. It resembles most nearly *L. chinensis* when compared with examples of all seven species growing in the same garden, but there are several differences from the palm I take to be good *L. chinensis*. A taxonomist might consider the differences not significant enough to warrant separate specific status for my favorite, but it does differ from *L. chinensis* most noticeably in these particulars: 1) it grows more than twice as fast; 2) there is, on the upper surface of the leaf blades, a sheen or glint that is in wide contrast with the dull green leaf surfaces noted in *L. chinensis*; 3) the petioles are armed with heavier and longer less recurved spines than those of *L. chinensis*, but this factor is not dependable because the petiolar armature is not always constant even in the same palm; 4) it first blooms at about half the age usually observed in *L. chinensis*; 5) it is much more retentive of live leaves than *L. chinensis* is, at least in this



This *Livistona* species holds over one hundred unblemished, vivid green leaves. To measure its great size, note the man in the right foreground.

garden, where fifteen of the latter ranging in age from ten to about forty years may be observed in various stages of growth, and this greater retention of foliage is evident at once, even though *L. chinensis* retains more live foliage, when favorably situated, than most other coryphoid palms.

My favorite is clothed at present with over one hundred unblemished vivid green leaves, to within a few feet of the ground. The lowest and oldest of these still green leaves have been on the palm since 1964 and 1965, quite unchanged by the frosts, freezes, droughts and windstorms of recent years. It would still be clothed quite to the ground if the lowest leaves had not been pruned away before they had become even a little unsightly. It is this unexampled mass of vivid green foliage that awes the beholder and gives the palm its majestic appearance. Added to this is the beauty of the leaf blades with the glint of sunshine or moonlight upon them, though brilliant even when shaded; and the fountain effect of the drooping leaf segments. This effect is heightened by the sheen so readily apparent in the accompanying illustration, but no mere black-and-white photograph can really convey the striking appearance of the green foliage.

Clearly enough, as the illustration suggests, my favorite is one of the "fountain palms," a sobriquet usually applied to *Livistona chinensis*, yet perhaps quite as apt for some of the other species. It may be an unnamed variety of *L. chinensis*, or a form of it not different enough to give it varietal rank. Or it may be the hybrid product of, say, *L. chinensis* and *L. australis*; but I hasten to add this would seem to me farfetched and quite unlikely to say the best of it, for I don't know if these palms cross, and moreover have no doubt, without any assurance to the contrary, that any-one else knows.

Perhaps I should mention, before I forget it, whence came my palm, its height and its age. It is now about fourteen years old. Ten years ago a few young palms of several different kinds had overgrown a small test-area in the lowland marl at the Fairchild Tropical Garden, and this phenomenal plant of mine, then consisting chiefly of roots and four-foot leaves, was dug and extricated from the tangle, placed on the floor of my car and transported to its new home, where it was replanted and at once began to flourish. It is now just over twenty-three feet tall to the top of its topmost leaf, a fact easily determined by using a ruler to relate the height of the palm in the illustration to the known height of the man standing near its base.

Apparently *Livistona*, a genus said to consist of some twenty species, has not yet been exhaustively studied. The species are widely dispersed in regions as far apart as central Australia and south central China, as also in Malaya, New Guinea and the Philippines, and presumably good herbarium specimens of every one do not exist.

If a botanist had compared the flowers of my palm with those of good *L. chinensis*, I daresay he would have found no differences; but up till now, this would have been impossible, for the palm had not reached bearing age. Two days ago, however, or precisely on January 7 of this year, I was amazed to find that it had suddenly come of age. I had gone out to check the number of leaves for this page in my script, and saw, while peering upward through the foliage, that seven long spadices had emerged and the inflorescences were already in full bloom. In January, mind, when at this latitude one often shivers and sometimes wonders if, after all, it might not be well to sharpen that long disused pair of ice skates. But not this season, for the local weather has been ab-

normally warm so far and not much different from a tropical winter, with avocados, citrus, bananas, and many other plants blooming before their time. This prompted an inspection of all the other *livistonas*, of whatever species on these grounds. Not one spadix is visibly emerging as yet from any of a dozen or so palms of flowering age, with the sole exception of that daring performer, which as I have already said, is in full bloom. Could this be significant of a specific difference? I cannot say, and must remain in this respect an agnostic, a word invented by Thomas Henry Huxley from the Greek *agnostos*, meaning "unknown" or "not to know." So I am an I-don't-knower about this as about all else having to do with taxonomy.

To have a favorite palm at all there has to be something outstanding about it. My palm seems to me overwhelmingly beautiful, but if the next hard freeze would turn it into an eyesore and perhaps kill it, I would not knowingly choose it as a favorite to be preferred above all other favorites. Luckily my palm is possessed of virtues more solid than the accident of beauty. It is tolerant of cold, drought and windstorm, and requires no special care of any kind. It is manifestly happy to be where it is, and seems wholly indifferent about whether anybody else besides me loves it or not. I should hope, though, that everybody would.

DENT SMITH

THE EDITOR'S CORNER

Only through the involvement of every member of the Palm Society can PRINCIPES fulfill its role as the leading journal of the world of palms. We would like every member to consider himself a reporter on the staff of this publication. The section we entitle PALM BRIEFS, for example, should be a lively and interesting part of PRINCIPES, a potpourri of news and observations about palms. We need your ideas, your newspaper clippings and photos, your letters to the editors or to the membership. All communications from you are solicited and welcomed. Send technical communications to Dr. Harold Moore, Bailey Hortorium, Mann Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14850. Non-technical materials and letters should be

sent to Warren J. Dolby, Contra Costa College, San Pablo, California 94806.

W.J.D.

The Editor regrets the lateness of the current issue which is due in part to a change in printing arrangements, in part to pressures of too many other duties which must take priority. For those readers who become impatient (including the Editors), let it be said that The Palm Society is not the only one whose journal is often delayed. Editing of society journals frequently (as with PRINCIPES) is an extracurricular labor of love and love sometimes has to give way when keeping up with professional obligations requires up to fourteen hours a day.

H.E.M.