

Rhyticocos Amara

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This interesting species, christened the "Overtop Palm" by L. H. Bailey, appears to have been making its debut as a horticultural subject and so it may be worthwhile to supply palm enthusiasts with some background information on the plant as it occurs in its native haunts in the Lesser Antilles.

I first became acquainted with this then little-known palm about 20 years ago while undertaking botanical exploration in the British West Indian island of Dominica (not to be confused with the Dominican Republic on the island of Hispaniola in the Greater Antilles). About the same time Dr. Bailey was meeting with it on the adjoining French islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique. On the basis of collections from Dominica and the French Antilles encompassing the then known range of the palm, he prepared the first really complete description and taxonomic account of this monotypic species (*Rhyticocos*—the Overtop Palm. *Gentes Herbarum* 4:366-372.1940). A year or so later the range was extended to St. Lucia, the next island south of Martinique, by Dr. John Beard, who located "tall groves" of *Rhyticocos* in scrub woodlands at a single restricted locality on the leeward coast. *Rhyticocos* is thus definitely known to be an endemic palm limited to the central volcanic isles of the Lesser Antilles.

On the basis of present knowledge the species as it exists today is apparently most abundant in the wild in Dominica where it occurs chiefly on the northwestern and northeastern coasts. This is not to be wondered at if one realizes that Dominica, although a small island with a total area of only 300 square miles, has very mountainous terrain and has not therefore attracted man and his agriculture to the extent of less rugged neighboring islands. Dominica's original forest resources including the native palms have thus not

suffered as much at the hands of man.

Rhyticocos is primarily a coastal species, inhabiting the drier scrub woodlands that form the climax vegetation typical of lower elevations in the Antilles. In Dominica, at least, this palm does not grow much above an elevation of 1000 feet, and only occurs at that altitude on the leeward (western) coast where, because of the rain-shadow effect of the interior mountains, it seems to be too dry at sea level for its successful growth. On the moister, windward (eastern) coast *Rhyticocos* grows upon the lower slopes and rocky bluffs close to the Atlantic and often within reach of the salt spray continually carried by the incessant Trade Winds. It must also bear the brunt of the seasonal hurricanes regularly born in the sea to the east of these islands. The foliage of this palm seems to be unaffected by salt spray and this should make *Rhyticocos* of interest to those desiring a tall slender palm for seaside plantings.

Its native region of growth, though described as "dry," is really wet by most standards for the annual coastal rainfall where this palm grows probably runs from around 60 to 90 inches. To be sure, the effectiveness of this precipitation is reduced by the "run off" caused by the steep slopes made up largely of poor quality soils, often red clay, with poor drainage characteristics. The annual temperature spread is small with an average maximum of 84° F. and an average minimum of 75° F.

Generally to be found scattered over the terrain that it occupies, the palm is at times gregarious, forming tall groves, the individual trees often standing high above all associated vegetation. The slender straight trunks may run from 30 to 50 feet high. The taller specimens usually grow in the more fertile soil and shelter to be found in small river valleys. In general vegetative habit



Photo by W. H. Hodge

RHYTIDOCOS AMARA. A small grove of the Overtop Palm at about 700 feet elevation on the leeward coast of Dominica, east of Dublanc.

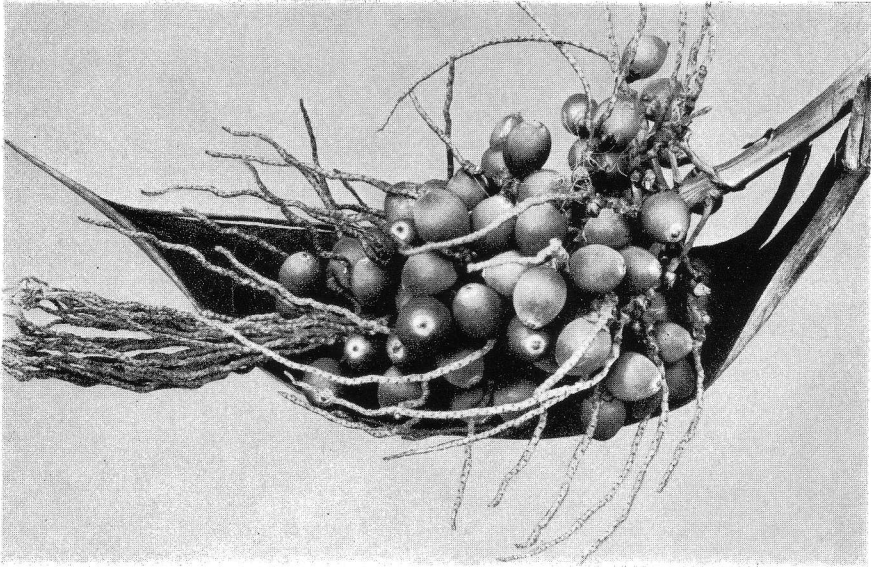
Rhyticocos looks like a slender but erect coconut palm and this likeness may even be extended to its attractive orange-colored fruits which, about the size of hens' eggs, look like miniature coconuts, even containing a milk (which is, however, bitter as reflected in the specific name "amara") when young. The clustered fruits are associated with attractive woody spathes which hang conspicuously from among the petiole bases of the attractive pinnate leaves. Actually *Rhyticocos* is rather closely related to the genus *Cocos*, so close in fact that it was originally described as *Cocos amarus* in 1763 by the Austrian Count Jacquin on the basis of specimens from Martinique. On that island it is known today as Petit Coco and in Dominica one of its names is Coco Nain, both names meaning "dwarf coconut."

Jacquin may have been the first to have originally written about this Lesser Antillean palm, but aborigines long before him appreciated it in their own way. The volcanic Caribbean Islands were the stronghold of the most savage of all the West Indian tribes, the Island Caribs, cannibals whose villages and encampments dotted the islands as far north as Puerto Rico. In the islands where the Overtop Palm grew it was known to the Indians as *iátaho*, a name now corrupted in the Creole patois of Dominica to Yattahou. To the Caribs the Overtop Palm was a utilitarian plant. According to Father Breton, an early French priest who compiled in 1665 one of the earliest Carib dictionaries, the Indians tapped the terminal bud of this palm and the liquid exudate so obtained was made into wine. The fruits likewise were utilized for making a fermented drink. Oil expressed from the bitter kernels of the nut (extracted by grating and boiling the endosperm) was one of the natural oils mixed with the red arillate coloring obtained from the seed of annatto

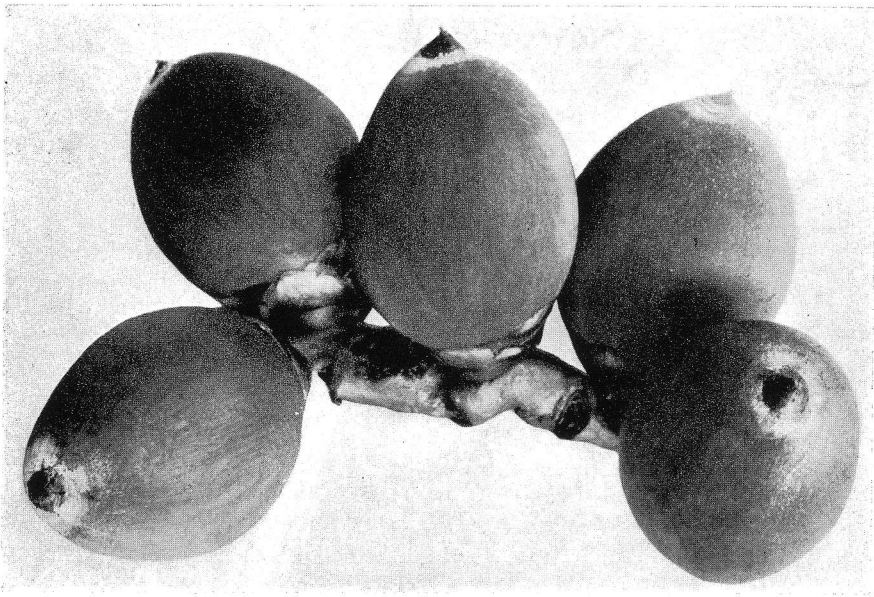
(the tropical American shrub, *Bixa orellana*, the ornamental "Lipstick Tree" of South Florida) to make the favorite red double-purpose body and insect repellant paint of the Caribs. Even though bitter, the nut kernels are often eaten by contemporary Carib children.

Undoubtedly Columbus was the first European to see *Rhyticocos*, for Dominica was the first landfall of his second voyage in 1493. He could hardly have failed to see this palm for on the eastern windward bluffs of the island it is the only common palm and, as indicated above, its crown grows conspicuously above most of the surrounding plants of the coastal woodlands. As a matter of fact, another probable Carib use of the Overtop Palm is recorded in 1494 in a well-known letter of Dr. Diego Chanca (Surgeon on Columbus' flagship) who described the houses of the coastal villages of neighboring Guadeloupe as being thatched with straw. More recent studies have pointed out that what looked like straw (on a heavily forested island no source of straw was available) was very likely thatch of plaited palm-leaves, a thatching material much used in the wet tropics. Judging from its present distribution *Rhyticocos* was the only readily available palm along the coast that could have been used for this purpose.

In his 1940 account in *Gentes Herbarum* Dr. Bailey reported that the Overtop Palm was then locally planted in gardens in the French Antilles as a horticultural subject. He also added that "this palm should add an interesting and attractive variety to plantations in the warmest parts of the United States." Fortunately this prediction is approaching fulfillment, reports in *PRINCIPES* indicating that this handsome economic plant of the Island Caribs is now being grown by some palm enthusiasts in Florida for its beauty alone.



RHYTICOCOS AMARA in fruit. The bract, not counting the curve, is 31 inches long. (Reprinted from *Gentes Herbarum* 4:371, fig. 234. 1940.)



RHYTICOCOS AMARA. Fresh fruit, approximately three-fourths full size. (Reprinted from *Gentes Herbarum* 4:371, fig. 235. 1940.)

It is now possible to state definitely that the dwarf *Reinhardtia* introduced by David Barry, Jr. from Mexico and mentioned in PRINCIPES 1:136 is *Reinhardtia gracilis* variety *gracilior*. Before leaving for Mexico, Dent Smith kindly forwarded male flowers of plants growing in his garden to the editor. These flowers have ten stamens and in other respects agree with variety *gracilior*.