

More Palms than Pyramids: Egypt Has a Garden in the Nile

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It was 2:30 A.M., 19 August, 1977, when our flight from Malta, which had been delayed, hit the runway in Cairo. Departing earlier from Miami, we had revisited Kew Gardens, then flew on to Malta to see some of our family and friends there, thence to Cairo to satisfy a longtime curiosity. The archaeological attractiveness of Egypt notwithstanding, we also wanted to see its palms, the progenitors of which antedate the tombs and pyramids.

Recovery of our modest traveling gear, and processing, in the unbelievable confusion of the Cairo air terminal, plus finding reliable transportation were time consuming, and we registered in the Nile Hilton downtown about 4:30 A.M., but not before a discussion at the desk regarding the validity of our advance reservation.

We were in our room, and travel-weary, when an unmistakable buzz zoomed in. It sounded exactly like the fly that had greeted us earlier in the Cairo terminal. This nemesis had accompanied us on into the hotel; it never left us in Egypt!

Later that day we contacted acquaintances whose helpfulness was indispensable to our exploration of Cairo and environs. The three Great Pyramids and Sphinx abut the edge of the desert, across the Nile in Giza about ten miles from Cairo, and are partially visible from the upper floors of the hotel. There are no palms at the immediate site. To us, the Sphinx was rather surprising. Instead

of the gigantic, half-human, half-lion eminence usually portrayed in traditional photographs, it is relatively small and could be obscured by a few clusters of *Phoenix dactylifera*, if grown there.

The Nile is Egypt, and very little vegetation is found beyond irrigated reaches of the river. Egypt's almost 400,000 square miles embrace an area larger than Texas and Oklahoma combined, but less than five percent of it (along the river all the way from Abu Simbel to Alexandria) is in cultivation; the rest of it is the Sahara. There is virtually no rain. Cairo gets less than one inch annually! After living and traveling in the tropics for over a decade, in warm, moist air, we had difficulty adjusting to a hot and very dry intake.

So we weren't expecting to find any tropical rain forests or palms, which thrive in such environment. In fact there are no forests of any kind in Egypt, although going along we saw individual trees, clumps, and larger cultivations of *Phoenix* (mostly *dactylifera*) that seemed to defy the idea that a forest couldn't exist in Egypt (see Fig. 1). Of course, all the palms were near the reaches of the river.

Next day, we cabbed across the Nile again to the 70-acre Orman Botanic Garden in Giza, adjoining the Cairo University, where we called at the headquarters and were not only welcomed but given expert assistance in viewing the garden. Our arrival had been expected, thanks to arrangements that had been



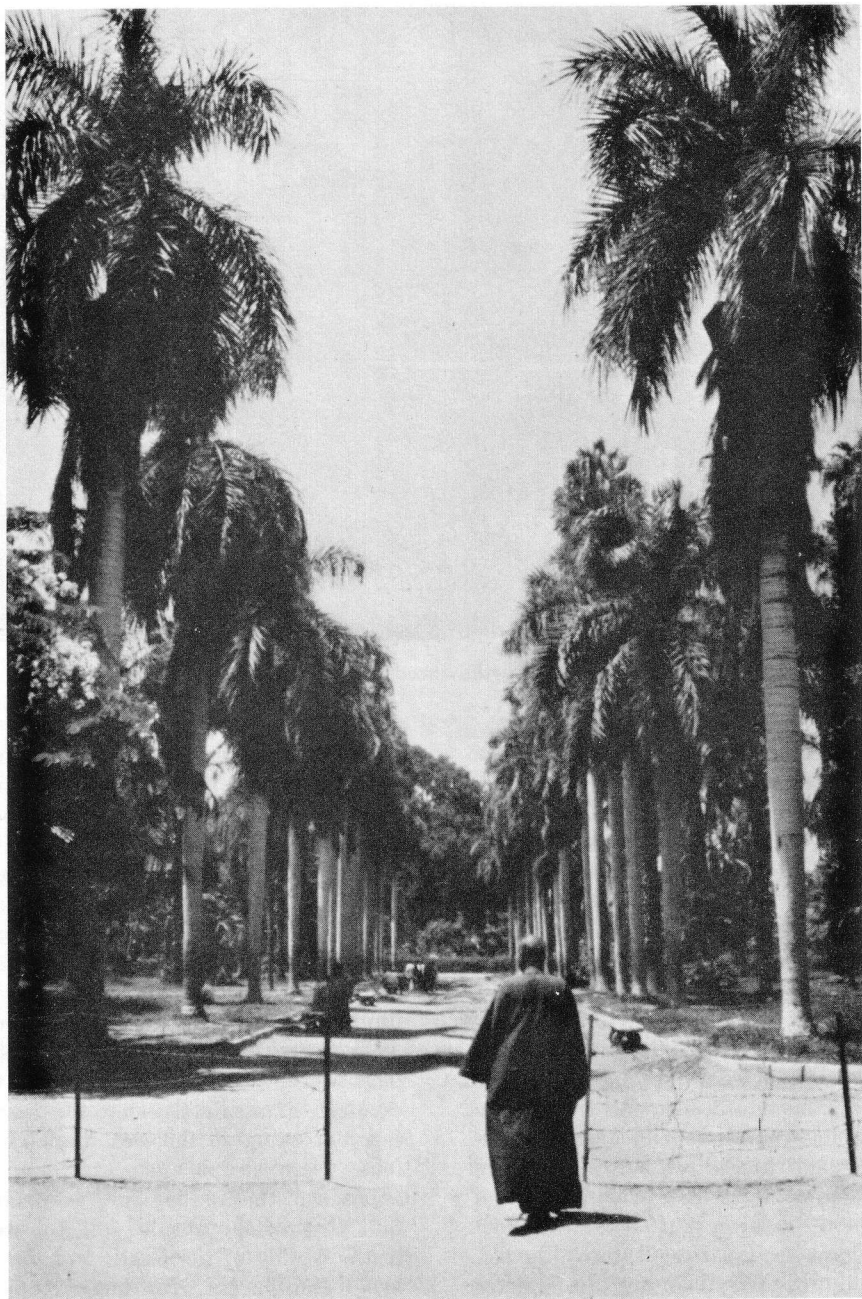
1. Dates galore! *Phoenix dactylifera* in Alexandria.

made by Professor Vivi Täckholm, of the University, with whom we had corresponded. Her works have been fundamental; her contributions and her interest in palms are treasured by members of The Palm Society (see *Flora of Egypt*, Vol. II, Bulletin of the Faculty of Science, No. 28, Cairo, 1950).

Unfortunately, Professor Täckholm had to be away from Egypt at the time of our visit, but Mr. Hosny Kamel, Director of the Herbarium, guided us on a tour of the Garden. There is a fine royal palm avenue (Fig. 2) as well as *Phoenix canariensis*, *Erythea*, *Washingtonia*, *Ptychosperma elegans*, *Latania*, and others (see Fig. 3). Returning to the Herbarium, we were given some coveted seeds, particularly *Hyphaene thebaica*, which we hoped could be established back in Florida, particularly in Fairchild Tropical Garden, where apparently this species has failed after earlier attempts.

We left our very helpful friends at the garden headquarters to go across a busy intersection and on through turnstiles into the zoological garden, nearby. Despite the paucity of beasts, which we weren't looking for, anyway, the zoo is a "must" for plant lovers. One part of it houses nurseries that supply the botanical gardens, as well as some of the government's landscaping operations. Many palms are cultivated in the nursery, and we toured all the plots under the expert guidance of Mr. Mohamed Farid Allam, the nursery's agricultural engineer.

The zoological garden seemed to contain as many palms as the botanic garden and many of them looked healthier. Going along a walkway we passed a very black, burnt trunk in a row of *Phoenix*. What happened? Our escort explained, "Birds nest in the crowns of these trees. Snakes go up the trees looking for the birds and their eggs. We set fire to the



2. Section of the royal palm avenue in Orman Botanic Garden, Giza.



3. Mr. Hosny Kamel, Phyllis Sneed, and Palms, Orman Garden.

trunks, burning the dead leaf bases, to get rid of the snakes!"

Unlike many avid palm-seed collectors, gardeners and date pickers don't like to take chances. Dates ripen in Egypt in August and September, the time of our visit, and various methods are used, including gun shots into the crowns, to make date harvesting a less hazardous occupation.

A day's trip to Alexandria, about 135 miles north of Cairo, brought us to the Mediterranean seacoast, with rows of resort hotels reminiscent of Miami Beach, and greater humidity. We visited local parks, saw streets lined with palms, and toured the botanic garden there, which for Egypt has a fair collection (Fig. 4). Also in this area we saw the greatest concentration of commercially grown date trees. The fruit clusters, full and heavy in the tree tops, often were encased in bags.

Back in Cairo we made arrangements

to fly up the Nile to Luxor and Aswan, where (besides the monuments, tombs, and temples) we hoped to see *Hyphaene thebaica*, which is indigenous there, and a place in the Nile called "Plant Island."

Circumventing some of the perpetual chaos in the Cairo air terminal, we took a domestic flight on Egypt Air Lines to Luxor, a trip of an hour and a half with impressive views of the Nile and desert expanse. Upon arrival, our two small bags were whisked away and we were escorted immediately onto an ancient ferry crossing to the west bank of the Nile. Here, steeped in perspiration and exposed to the midday sun, we explored the "City of the Dead," and the tombs in the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens. Nothing we can say here would enhance the antique grandeur of this west bank region. Its environs, and beyond, are desert. There are few living palms to be seen, but one concerned enough about their early exis-



4. Typical view in botanic garden, Alexandria.

tence might find rewards in the diligent study of carvings and paintings in the tombs.

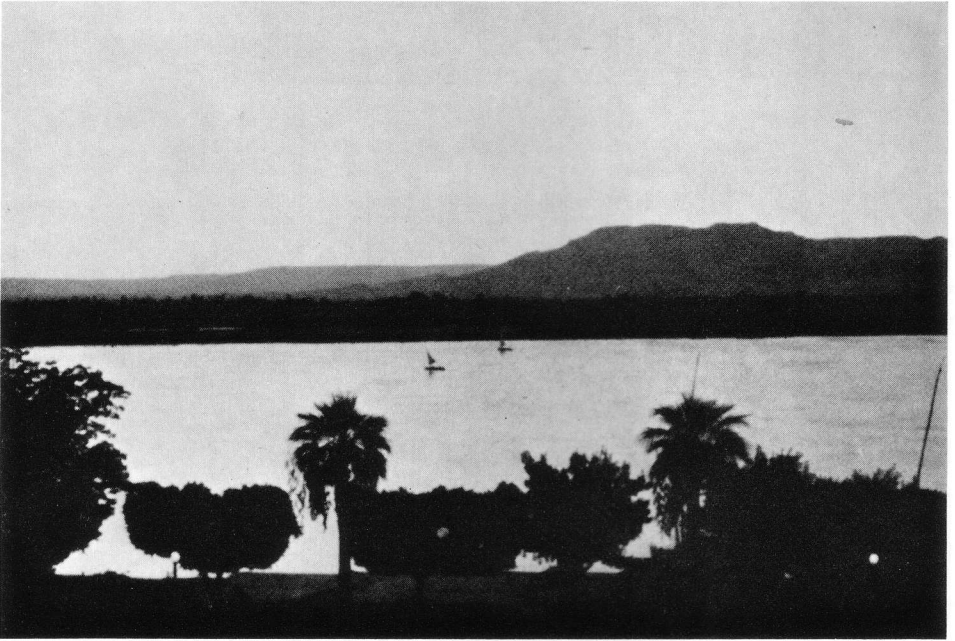
In late afternoon, back across the river, we relaxed in the old Winter Palace Hotel, after a considerable climb up very grand staircases. (The elevator was not in service.) We adored the view of the Nile there, where the cloudless sunset silhouetted palms and river craft and reflected the vast desert expanse beyond the west bank (Fig. 5).

Early next day we departed the hotel for visits to Temples of Luxor and Karnak, a magnificent and awesome group. One could walk the relatively short distance but it's far more interesting to be transported by the traditional horse-carriage, which not only allows one to proceed at a higher elevation, for better visibility, but also imparts the feeling of stepping back into history. Notwithstanding our regrettable lack of Arabic, we managed to stall the procession long

enough for the author to capture the grandeur of it all, which was enhanced by a fine, small group of *Phoenix* in the background (Fig. 6). Such clusters of *Phoenix* were typical of the landscape in the Luxor area, as well as other places visited in Egypt, all of which were close to the Nile.

Egypt Airlines, with an efficient jet flight, took us on to Aswan. The short trip was spectacular, following the Nile, where one can see fertile lands stretching inland from the river wherever irrigated waters flow, and absolutely barren desert abutting the stream where irrigation has not intervened. We registered in the New Cataract Hotel, which we enjoyed even though we were there in August and the place is geared for winter months.

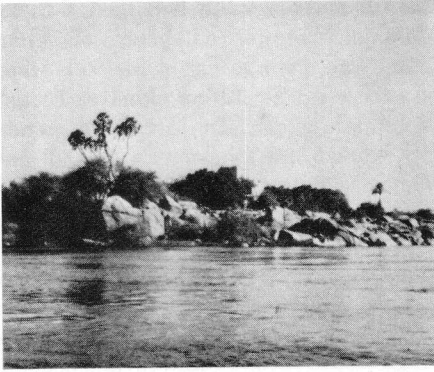
We were privileged to visit the High Dam and some of its precincts, which mean so much to the economy of Egypt. Perhaps it was too much to expect that the landscapers would have made more



5. Sunset on the Nile, Luxor.



6. *Phoenix*, Phyllis and friends near Karnak temples, Luxor.



7. *Hyphaene thebaica* fronts small island near Aswan.

use of palms when decorating the new open areas—especially palms that could survive there with some of the abundance of water available in the enormous reaches of Lake Nasser, above the dam.

This brings us to the heart of our quest in Egypt, which, of course, was neither pyramids, tombs, nor temples. We were looking for palms, and we had seen thousands of them all the way from Alexandria in the North to Aswan in the South. True, Egypt, dry as it is, furnishes no haven for palm species that thrive only in the wet tropics. For some time, however, we had heard mention of a "Plant Island" somewhere in the Nile, near Aswan. We had scant information about it and wanted to see it.

After returning from the dam trip, and a luncheon respite at the New Cataract, we went down steeply tiered steps from the hotel to the river to embark on a felucca for a look at relics, etc., on small islands that dot the Nile just below the old (low) dam. We were not deeply concerned with much of this excursion so made arrangements with our captain to maneuver us on over to "Plant Island."

How they sail these crafts against the wind, or without any wind and against the currents of the Nile, will remain a



8. *Hyphaene thebaica* and *Roystonea* tangle, Plant Island in the Nile at Aswan.

mystery to us. As a crow might fly, the distance from the hotel couldn't be over a half mile, but that sail boat went in all directions, several times, around other little rock islands, back and forth, darting before wind gusts and being oared or poled when wind died down. After what seemed a very long time we arrived at the dock on Plant Island, albeit in late afternoon.

This tiny piece of land in the middle of the Nile at Aswan is boat-shaped, and perhaps one-fourth mile long by 500 feet wide. Irrigation hoses, the size of fire hoses, were stretched along the walkways. The soil appeared fertile. The tendency now, in tourist information, if not official recognition, is to call the place the "Botanical Garden." It also has been called "Kitchener Island," as well as other names. It might well be regarded as a miracle island, for in a



9. *Phyllis* furnishes scale for *Corypha*, Plant Island, Aswan.

land so devoid of rainfall, who would expect to find such a pleasant garden with an interesting collection of plants, even in the Nile?

Phyllis and I had been looking for seeds of *Hyphaene*, especially *H. thebaica*, which is indigenous in the Aswan area. As noted earlier, some seeds had been acquired at the Orman Garden in Giza and that was all we were able to obtain. We had no success in collecting more of them in the Aswan area. There was a nice specimen—not with ripe fruit—on the point of a very small island in the river near “Plant Island” (Fig. 7). *Hyphaene thebaica* was on “Plant Island” too, but it was hard to photograph because of competition given it by close-growing *Roystonea* which were part of a walkway of royal palms that bisected the entire island (Fig. 8).

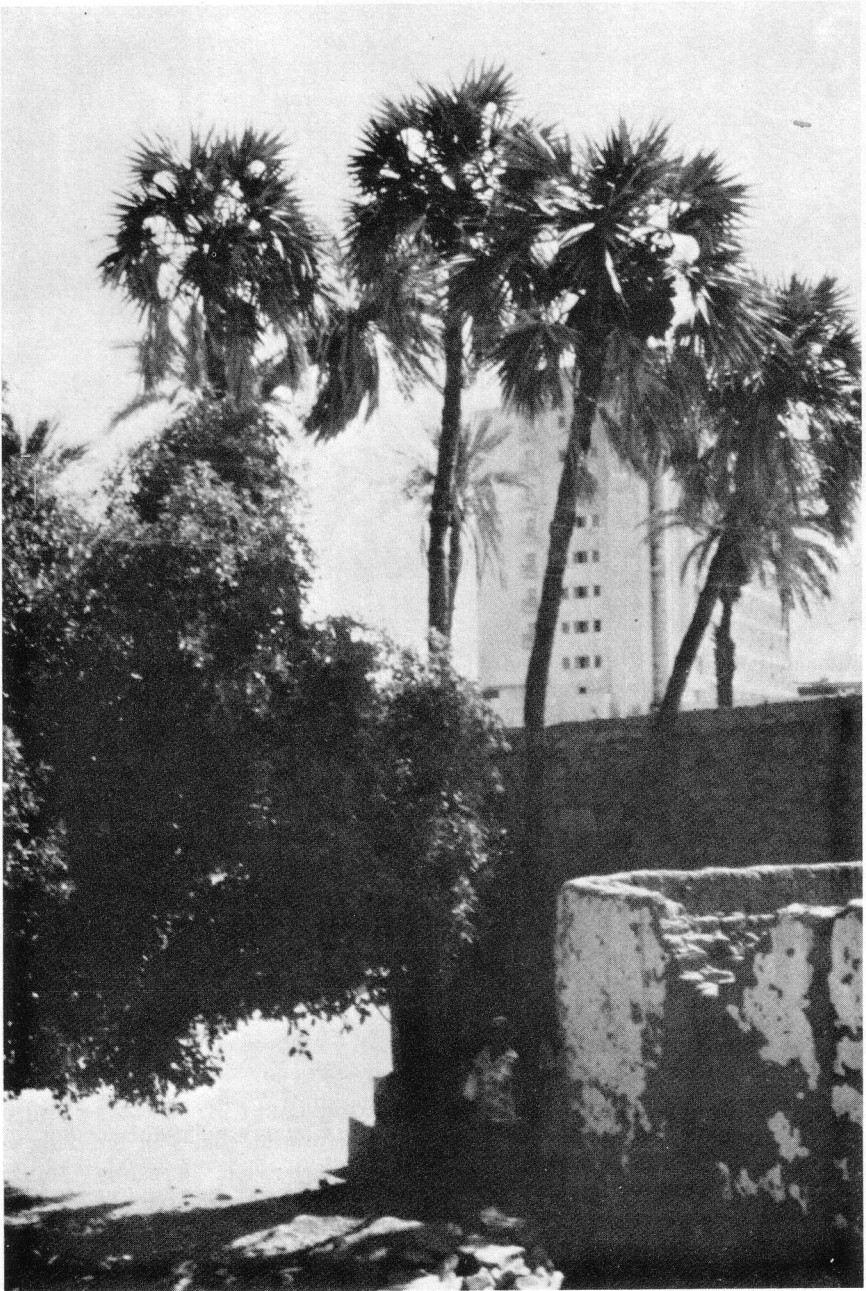
Professor Täckholm advised us that

Plant Island originally belonged to Field-Marshal Viscount Kitchener of Khartoum, who came to Egypt in 1911, when he succeeded Sir Eldon Gorst as British diplomatic agent. The island was generally known as Kitchener’s Island and planted with “palms, bananas, oleanders, pomegranates and roses.” Later it was taken over by the Egyptian Government and has evolved into a small botanic garden. Interestingly enough, according to Professor Täckholm, the island is the only place in Egypt where the coconut palm succeeded and produced fruits, the first of which were presented to the king.

Unfortunately, as we often have found elsewhere during our palm travels, no catalogue of plants was available to help find and identify Plant Island’s flora, nor was anyone in attendance whom we might question. For such a small garden, located where it is, the diversity was surprising. Palms dominated the collection, including the central walkway of *Roystonea*. We only saw three *Hyphaene thebaica*, but other species of *Hyphaene* lined the west side of the garden at the edge of the steep bank some 20 feet above the Nile. *Phoenix* species were there, of course, and we saw attractive clumps and specimens of *Rhapis*, *Attalea*, *Chamaerops*, *Borassus flabellifer*, *Raphia*, *Latania*, *Caryota*, and *Sabal palmetto* from Florida! There was a towering *Corypha umbraculifera* which dwarfed Phyllis at its base as the sun began casting shadows (Fig. 9). The garden had *Livistona*, *Ptychosperma elegans*, *Thrinax*, *Calamus* species, and other palms that we didn’t identify and record.

We left Plant Island, reluctantly, but the sun sets quickly and the captain of our felucca was becoming impatient. Boarding the boat we reached the hotel’s docks just as the sun disappeared behind sand dunes across the Nile.

Within walking distance of our lodg-



10. *Hyphaene* in fruit, near New Cataract Hotel, Aswan.



11. The author indulges in his conception of ideal seed collecting. These *Phoenix dactylifera* fruits were easy to reach and tasty besides!

ings we found *Hyphaene* loaded with fruit (see Fig. 10) but after collecting a few of them, with the help of a climber, we discovered their immaturity and abandoned our quest for viable seeds. However, a young *Phoenix dactylifera* was more than obliging, furnishing not

only easily accessible collecting but a delicious taste-treat as well (Fig. 11).

This ended our palm hunt in Egypt. We flew back to Cairo, then on to Miami via Paris, where, interestingly enough, we saw more palms (in Jardin des Plantes and at Versailles) than follies!

PALM LITERATURE

HARRIES, HUGH C. 1977. Sixteenth-century dissemination of the coconut palm. *Isis* 68: 605-606.

———. Cape Verde region 1499 to 1549); the key to coconut culture in the Western Hemisphere? *Turrialba* 27: 227-231, fig. 1.

These two papers are concerned with the early history of the coconut in Africa and its introduction into the Western Hemisphere excluding the Pacific coast.

KLOTZ, LARRY H. 1978. Form of the perforation plates in the wide vessels of metaxylem in palms. *Journal of the Arnold Arboretum* 59: 105-128, fig. 1-43, table 1-2.

The results of a survey of the form of perforation plates in the metaxylem of palms is summarized. The nature of plates is compared and contrasted in petiole, stem, and root among the taxonomic and ecological groups of palms.