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An October Sunday in Birmingham

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If you lived in Birmingham, Alabama and invited a friend, even a horticulturally inclined one, to spend an hour or two on an October Sunday afternoon driving around to admire palms, he would say, "Hey! You're nuts! There aren't any palms in Birmingham." And he'd be almost right. Almost. We will take that drive shortly.

First, Birmingham lies at what appear to be the northern reaches of U.S. Horticultural Zone 8 with winter temperatures normally reaching 10-20° F and several times most winters reaching a single digit. The first killing frost normally occurs about November 11 and the last about March 19. It has long been the opinion of this native Birminghamian and palm fancier that this is the coldest place on earth to be so far south. Consider sunny, palm-infested San Clemente, California at a similar latitude. My thoughts on this matter were forever set in concrete when in January 1982, the U.S. Weather Bureau here recorded the following official low temperatures: January 10, 1° F; January 11, -2° F; January 17, -1° F. Considerably lower temperatures were unofficially recorded in the area on these dates as might be expected. Strangely, on January 19 an official record high for that date of 74° F was set barely 48 hours after -1° F. This is palm country?

It should be readily apparent from the foregoing that palm culture in Birmingham will have limitations to say the least. But be of good cheer! All is not lost. It is my happy privilege to report that specimens of *Sabal palmetto* (cabbage palm), *Sabal minor*, *Trachycarpus fortunei*

(windmill palm) and *Rhapidothymum hystrix* (needle palm) survived the past winter unprotected; and that specimens, although small, of *Butia capitata* (jelly palm), *Chamaerops humilis* (Mediterranean fan palm) and *Washingtonia* (sp. uncertain) survived with minimal protection. Unfortunately, I must also report in fairness that some unprotected adult specimens of *S. palmetto* and *T. fortunei* were killed and that one beautiful cluster of four large *T. fortunei* was sawed off at the ground by its owner in late spring apparently because the leaves were all dead and despite the fact that each trunk was actively throwing out fresh flower stalks. It should be mentioned that virtually all leaves were killed on all specimens of *S. palmetto* and *T. fortunei* and that in *T. fortunei* the initial sign of survival was the growth of a fresh flower stalk. Leaves followed. These remarks concluded, it is almost time to begin our October Sunday drive to view the survivors. Where history of a particular specimen is known, it will be given. Fortunately, after initial suspicion and incredulity, all owners seemed happy to reveal what they could of their palms and all were proud of them. Now, the setting for our drive.

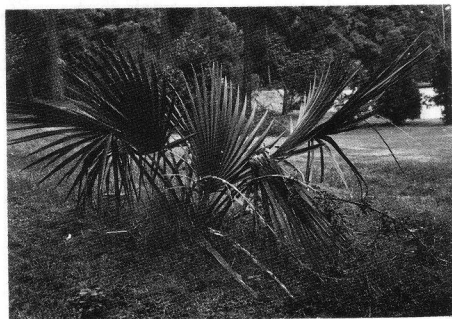
The past Thursday and Friday were dreary with badly needed soaking rains which cleared the air and somehow, despite the season, greened the dry-brown early fall motif. Saturday has seen clearing weather. This Sunday afternoon, October 10, is mostly sunny, humid and warm with a current temperature of 81° F. Let's get going.

Our first stop is at the Birmingham



1. *Sabal palmetto* at Botanical Gardens.

Botanical Gardens where we see a large, thick-trunked specimen tagged *Sabal palmetto* (Fig. 1). Garden records state that this plant came from California as a seedling, was planted in the western area of Birmingham years ago, for some reason thrived, and in 1976 was transplanted to its current site. It certainly has been completely unprotected since that time, it



2. *Sabal minor*, also at the Gardens.



3. Windmill palm in church gardens.

flowers and fruits profusely, and its seeds germinate readily. There is speculation that this tree may be a *Sabal palmetto*-*S. mexicana* hybrid, and somehow, despite the records, there is a nagging feeling that the early history of this specimen is suspect. Nonetheless, it is clearly a *Sabal* which has survived a -2° F night.

While here at the Gardens, we should also note that *Sabal minor* (Fig. 2) flourishes. These plants seem to suffer minimal leaf damage; they flower and fruit annually, and their seeds germinate readily. Time to move on.

We have headed north into downtown Birmingham to the courtyard garden of a large Episcopal church where, as in Figure 3, we see this relatively small *T. fortunei*. This specimen was planted in the garden "a number of years ago," was moved within the year before the January 1982 deep freeze to its present location, and, despite no protection and its recent



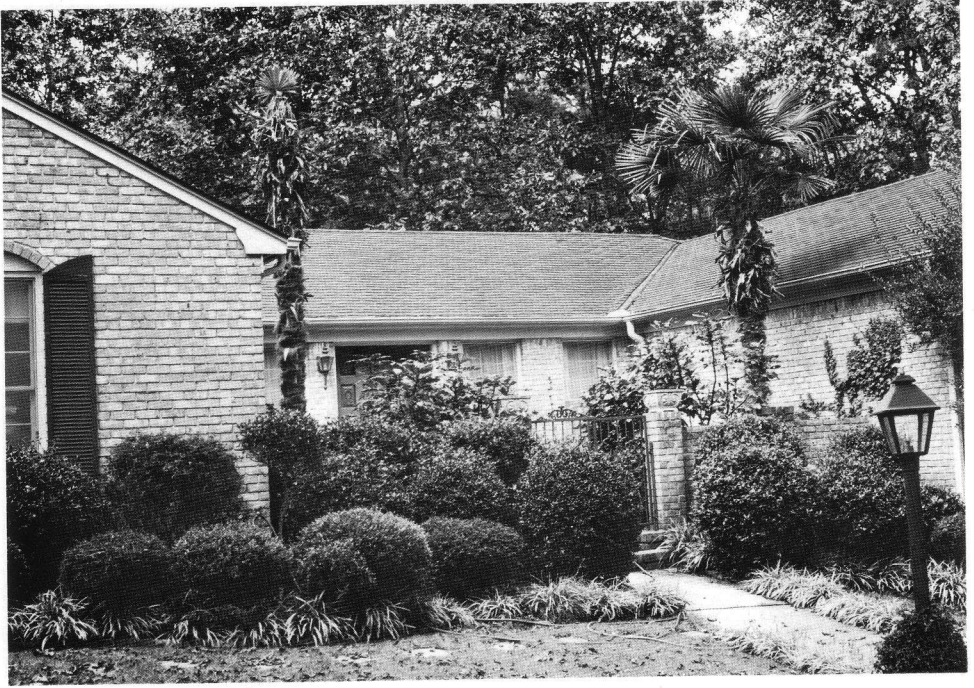
4. Needle palm on Southside.



5. Cabbage palm—its blanket went off last winter.



6. Windmill palms—into the power lines.



7. Windmill palms—plant on left just beginning to recover.



8. Windmill palm—a member of the family.

move, seems to have survived handily. We must now head southeast to near Avondale Park.

Here we see a large *R. hystrix* (Fig. 4) which has been prospering for years. Rumor has it that this specimen is the only one remaining of three originally at this location; the other two were destroyed in the name of "progress" during construction of an apartment building. This plant and all other known needle palms in town suffered no apparent injury from the cold, their leaves seeming to survive normally. Now south to the suburbs.

We are in Mountain Brook, a lovely residential area where reside the remainder of our palms. The cabbage palm in Figure 5 was planted as a modest specimen by its current owner in its present location about 17 years ago. Initially this plant was protected by a plastic covered wooden frame in winter, but as it grew it became more difficult to protect. After



9. Small *Butia capitata*.

some time it could not be framed so it was simply wrapped entirely in plastic. This eventually became difficult until only its crown of leaves could be wrapped. In winter now its trunk is wrapped in an electric blanket, the blanket is wrapped in plastic, and the leaves are unprotected. The blanket is turned on in November and left on until spring. During our January 1982 deep freeze, an ice storm resulted in a power outage over the coldest period and the blanket was off for five days. All the leaves died and the first signs of life did not appear until early July. The owner confided that had the tree not survived, it would nevertheless have been allowed to remain because of the pleasure it had afforded over the years. On to Cherokee Bend, also in Mountain Brook.

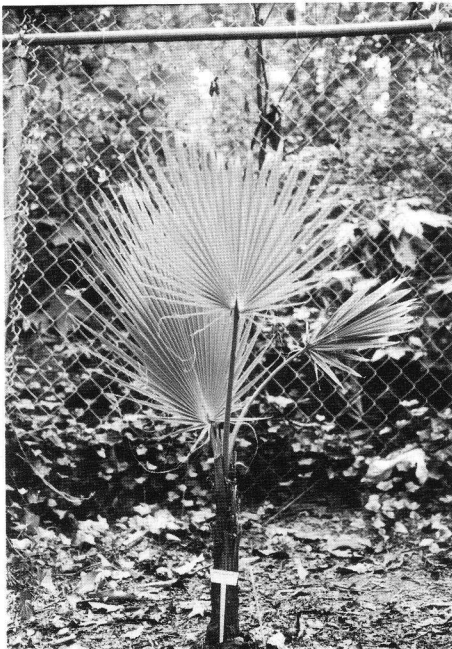
In a side courtyard we see two large, handsome *T. fortunei* (Fig. 6). Their current owner has been in the home only two years, but he knows that the plants have

been there in excess of ten years and, in all likelihood, about fifteen. These trees lost all of their leaves, but now appear quite restored to health. They pose a peculiar problem for the Alabama Power Company tree crews, unused to trimming palms, as they inexorably grow into the lines. On to Dunbarton, another area of Mountain Brook.

At this home, in a beautifully planted front courtyard, we see two large *T. fortunei* (Fig. 7). As is perfectly obvious, one plant is far happier than the other. Both were planted as approximate four foot specimens by the current owner some 14 years ago. They have never been protected. It is uncertain why one tolerated the cold so much better than the other in view of their obvious similarity in size. Small leaves are just now making their appearance in the plant on the left. Hopefully it will recover. Next stop, the Knollwood section of Mountain Brook.



10. Mediterranean fan—suckering only.



11. *Washingtonia*—once given up for dead.

It's another beautifully situated *T. fortunei* (Fig. 8). According to its owner, this specimen was planted when small near its present location, but beneath the portico. It grew to the roof and approximately five years ago had to be moved to its present location. As with the other windmills, it lost all its leaves this winter, first grew a flower stalk, and then began to grow leaves. Although it is considered "a member of the family" by the owner, it has never been protected in winter. We must now move to our final stop in the Redmont area of Mountain Brook.

Here, in a side yard, we see lovingly-cared-for (by me), tiny plants of *Butia capitata* (Fig. 9), *Chamaerops humilis* (Fig. 10), and *Washingtonia* (sp. uncertain) (Fig. 11) which, with the help of lots of leaves about their stems and some flimsy, often windblown and torn plastic over their tops, survived. All leaves were killed and in the case of the Mediterra-

nean fan, the original small trunk was killed also, the new growth sprouting as suckers. Not pictured, but in the same yard, are several veteran needle palms which survived unaffected; a young windmill, an adult cabbage, several seedling *Sabal minor*, and a *Washingtonia fili-*

fera grown from seed; all facing their first winter outdoors here. With luck, hopefully all will survive for another tour another fall afternoon.

Now our drive is over and it's plain to see: there are indeed palms to enjoy in Birmingham!

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