

## Palms in Nepal Near the Top of the World

MELVIN W. SNEED

8107 S.W. 72nd Avenue, Apt. 113 E, Miami, Florida 33143

We departed New Delhi early morning 27 November, 1978, for Kathmandu, Nepal. We had been in India two weeks, several days of which were devoted to Kashmir and trips around and out of Srinagar. We were eager to look into the enchantments and mysteries of Nepal. This sometime remote, forbidding area, famed as the fitting-out base for heroic scalers of Mt. Everest, was reached in short order by jet flight on Royal Nepal Airlines. Direct flights also are scheduled from Calcutta and Bangkok. Enroute we caught a near view of the grandeur of Everest and adjoining snow-crested sister peaks in the Himalayas.

Nepal, shrouded in age-old culture, ancient cities with their superb temples, and many, many other attractions, is a unique place for travelers. Much of the fascinating detail is beyond the scope of this brief article. But one must visit the Temple of the Living Goddess and nearby Patan, with its array of Buddhist and Hindu temples and monuments. It is highly photogenic; one can keep the camera's shutters going constantly and never capture all of it.

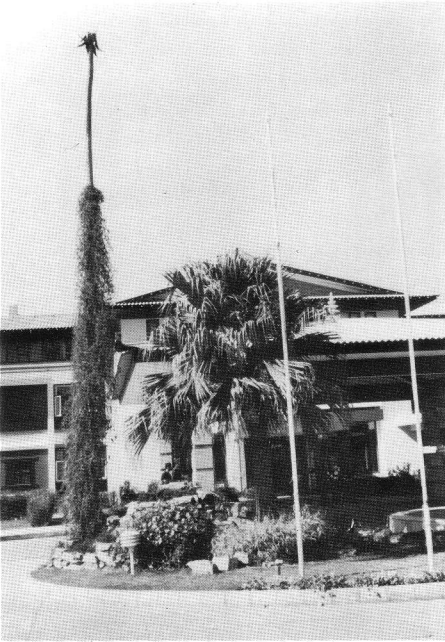
What generally is not recognized by many plant enthusiasts is that Nepal, more so, perhaps, than any other area of its size on earth (54,600 square miles) affords flora of all climatic zones. There are the Himalayan plants, thousands of them high in the east, temperate zone flora back west off the highlands, and subtropic and tropical plants farther west and south in the lowlands and jungles.

Kathmandu, the capital, is in a valley, a delightful area of fascinating places to

visit and friendly people who can be helpful, although usually they are not conversant in English. It has a choice of good hotels, and ours sported some palms out front (Fig. 1). Not far away, across the street in fact, one could see *Livistona chinensis*, *Trachycarpus*, and towering high, a very fine *Caryota* (probably *urens*) as in Figure 2. None of these palms was indigenous to Nepal. It may be of interest to note that Kathmandu has a latitude close to that of Miami, Florida, but otherwise there is little resemblance. The Kathmandu Valley is about 4,500 feet above sea level, while Miami is zilch, and certainly there are many other outstanding differences as well. Frankly, before we got there, we hadn't expected to see much in the way of palms in Nepal. But there they were, growing in the shadow of Mt. Everest!

We indulged in a foray out of Kathmandu to Dakshinkell Hindu Temple to see sacrificial ceremonies, where the participants come in great numbers from all directions bearing sacrificial lambs, chickens, pigs, goats, dogs, and so on, to be slaughtered at the shrine. Later, after exchanging greetings the best we could, sans language ability, with a most impressive attendant at the ceremonies, we went on to the Royal Botanical Garden, located about an hour's drive out of Kathmandu.

This garden was established by the King of Nepal in 1962. It is situated at Godavari, in the southeast end of the Kathmandu Valley, surrounded by forests. In our judgement it has the potential of becoming a very fine, small garden. Approximately one-third of the 30 acre



site has been developed, including a nursery, research center with laboratory and library, and palm plantings of *Areca catechu*, *Borassus* and *Caryota* (Fig. 3).

Back in Kathmandu we stripped down our gear to small over-night bags for a flight and trek to "Tiger Tops," in a jungle and former hunting reserve in the Royal Chitwan National Park. A trip to Tiger Tops is a thrill even for experienced travelers. To get there one flies, rides land rovers or elephants, and walks. Once there, the helter-skelter of everyday existence fades to a feeling of isolation.

From the aircraft landing strip at Meghauli, an open pasture amongst appropriate grazing animals, one can take the

←

1. *Livistona* fronts porte-cochere, Hotel De l'Annapurna, Kathmandu. (Trunk of dead palm at left supports flowering vine.)



2. *Caryota* furnishes fine background for craft shops near Royal Palace, Kathmandu.



“elephant ride route” or the “land rover route.” Both ford the wide Rapti River which in the monsoon months becomes a greatly swollen stream, unfordable at the time. This explains why one does not go to Tiger Tops from July to October each year. In fact, it is closed to visitors at that time.

Once ensconced in the tall, stilt-legged hotel accommodations, excitement mounts. At night one can look out on the trail at a baited lure for the great Bengal tiger, and by day ride the magnificent elephants (Tiger Tops maintains a fine herd of some 15) through the tall grasses in quest of the famed one-horned rhino, rare and native to Nepal (Fig. 4). We were lucky—the transport for our major trek through

←

3. Young *Caryota* with Phyllis for scale, Royal Botanical Garden, Godawari, Nepal.



4. Nepal's rare, indigenous, one-horned rhino, photographed in the marshes from atop an elephant.



5. *Phoenix* juvenile transplant in landscaping at Tiger Tops, Chitwan National Park, Nepal.

the bush was a magnificent bull tusker. We were astonished at how gently and reassuringly this enormous animal trudged through deep mud in the marshes, crossed rivers, and bull-dozed through bush.

No palms were visible in the marsh and tall grass areas. Certainly the elephant carrying us was tall enough to provide a wide-ranging view. But we had seen perhaps a half dozen, small, scrubby-looking, juvenile palms that had been transplanted back in the Tiger Tops' Lodge enclave. In the heavy mist of early morning and lack of time before our expedition of the day, we paid little attention to them. We went on by boat and afoot to spend a fascinating day and night at the Tiger Tops Tented Camp, on an island in the Narayani River, at the western boundary of the National

Park. Later, after returning from the camp, where we saw no palms, we began to wonder about the transplants noticed earlier. Tiger Tops does not have a large staff devoted to extraneous things, although there was a whole colony to look after the elephants (each elephant required 3 to 4 attendants). A most congenial man on the staff explained that they had simply transplanted the palm juveniles from where they were found growing naturally back up in the hills, not far from the lower hotel site.

Though we were scheduled to return to Kathmandu later in the day, going back across the rivers, etc., we felt we must explore the hill area where the palms were said to be growing. The Tiger Tops' naturalist agreed to guide us up the hill to



6. *Phoenix* sp., hill area habitat near Tiger Tops, Chitwan National Park, Nepal.

find them. Now, your author absolutely hates to climb hills, especially steep ones.

This one was quite steep, with a narrow, rocky path, but after about 20 minutes of climbing to the palm area, Phyllis and I wondered if we had staggered into an indigenous stand of a species of dwarf *Phoenix*. We couldn't identify the species, nor could we find any flowers or fruit. The palm was not particularly attractive, growing in the bush, and remarkable to us was that it existed there, in that more-or-less undisturbed area. It seemed highly unlikely that anyone deliberately planted palms in this location. We wondered whether birds, or wind, or otherwise might have accomplished it. In any case, we couldn't find out anything about the origin of the palm, much less the name of the species. But it clearly appeared to be a *Phoenix*. Phyllis gives scale for transplants in Figure 5 and the palm is shown in its habitat on hillside in Figure 6.

So palms, versatile as often they are, can be found near the top of the world. Hopefully, all of us can try to keep them growing from one end to the other of our gardens.

## CLASSIFIED

SEEDLINGS available at this time. *Attalea cohune*, *Brahea armata*, *B. brandegeei*, *B. nitida*, *Jubaea spectabilis*, *Roystonea regia*, *Sabal dugesii*, and many others. Write for current price list. SCARAB ENTERPRISES, 4011 Dwight Street, San Diego, CA 92105.

AVAILABLE AT THIS TIME. Seedlings of *Gronophyllum ramsayii*, *Phoenix rupicola*, *Neodypsis decaryi*, *Latania loddigesii*, *Bismarckia nobilis*, *Coccothrinax crinita*, and many others. Write for price list. RICHARD RUDY, P.O. Box 252, Winter Beach, FL 32971.

DWARF RHAPIS EXCELSA, Seven green and variegated varieties available. NEW BOOK, "Secret of the Orient," a comprehensive guide to **Rhapis** palms—52 pages fully illustrated. Catalogue \$1. Book and catalogue \$5 ppd. ("Secret of the Orient" is also available from The Palm Society Bookstore). RHAPIS GARDENS—PS, P.O.D. 287, GREGORY, TX 78349.