Principes, 29(3), 1985, pp. 124–128

Going Palmy in Ohio

TAMAR MYERS
118 Stadia Drive, Franklin, OH 45005

People seem to have a penchant for toting their horticultural history with them. Thus it comes as no surprise to hear of Hawaiian gardens consisting exclusively of junipers, and of South Floridians doing their darnedest to establish maple groves. But 36 species of palms planted permanently in the ground in Ohio? Surely you jest! After all, southwestern Ohio is in an area of the United States where winter extremes are likely to level out somewhere between 0° F and −10° F. Just who would be crazy enough even to consider such a scheme?

I would. I was born in the then Belgian Congo, at a remote river-boat stop almost exactly 5 degrees south of the equator. When I was two years old we moved fifty miles due west to a plateau with an elevation of 2,000 ft. This place had, in my opinion, the perfect climate. In the fourteen years that I lived there the lowest temperature we ever recorded was 55° F, and the highest 90° F. Although there were not many species of indigenous palms in the area, the native *Elaeis guineensis* grew by the millions in nearby oil plantations. Even our Christmas tree was a "palm"—a wooden pole with the fronds of an Oil Palm cut to size and inserted into holes.

No wonder then that my first winter in the Midwest region of the United States was an absolute shocker. Nothing could have prepared me for the sight of the entire landscape shutting down, so to speak, for a third of the year. This part of the country receives only sporadic snow, so that the predominant winter colors are, by and large, brown and gray. Every time I looked out of the window that first winter and saw the leafless trees silhouetted against a cold-burnt horizon, I was sure that never in my past experiences had I ever seen nature present herself quite so uglily. Even the man-caused devastation of a savannah fire could not compete in desolation, for there, after a few weeks, not months, the green springs up more vigorous than before. One day, as I stood at the window watching the frozen drabness get even more so, I resolved that, since I could not move back to the tropics, I would do what I could to move the tropics to me.

So, I did what I could. Of course I couldn't import warm weather fronts, or alter the path of the jet stream, but I could, I had a hunch, find some plants that reminded me of home and that might possibly survive the winter outside. The search for these plants, particularly palms, was a long and disorganized process. I didn't even have an inkling at the time that there was a Palm Society, and it was quite by chance that I stumbled across two *Trachycarpus fortunei* growing in Victoria, British Columbia. When I enthusiastically shared my discovery with a fellow tourist, ironically a Canadian, I was assured (somewhat erroneously) that the palms were taken indoors for the winter. It wasn't until a decade after my quest had begun, that a nurseryman in Texas reluctantly confided that the Windmill Palm could tolerate perhaps a few degrees of frost. In retrospect, my quest then had only just begun.

A *Trachycarpus fortunei* is not, of course, an *Elaeis guineensis*, but it is a

tough little critter. Needless to say, we (by this time I had acquired a non-palmy husband) bought a small specimen and rushed it a thousand miles back home, as if it were a rare and extremely valuable discovery, which of course it was. That was in May. In September of that same year we sold our house and moved to an apartment. Of course the palm came with us, and thanks to an understanding landlord, was planted in the open behind our ground-floor patio.

Neophytes that we were, that first winter we protected the experimental *Trachycarpus* with a plastic-covered wood frame heated by a single 100 watt light bulb. The palm was less than 3 ft. high, as was the shelter, and we figured that the heat produced by the light would add sufficient heat to keep our poor victim alive. The plan was to switch the light on when the outside air temperature hit 25° F. We picked this figure arbitrarily, but as it turned out, the addition of extra heat at that point was indeed enough to keep the inside shelter temperature approximately 6° F higher than the outside air.

As fate would have it, that first winter proved to be the snowiest, and one of the coldest, on record. The snow was actually beneficial, as it served to seal the shelter to the ground, as well as provide overhead insulation. But despite the snowcover and light bulb, the inside temperature finally fell to −2° F, at which point the hapless palm was 50% defoliated. But it was also 50% undamaged, and so in our eyes (mine, at least) the experiment had been a resounding success.

The next logical step seemed to be experimenting with the palm out in the open—no light bulb, no shelter, nothing but the mercy of Mother Nature. I must add here that this by now somewhat confused palm had been moved again, and now found itself situated against the south side of a brick house, some 30 miles south of its previous location, and in a much more urban, and consequently warmer, area. This was fortunate, because nature was temperamental that year, and what was basically a mild winter was, alas, punctuated by a reading of −10° F in late January. However, to our delighted astonishment (mine, at least) this determined little *Trachycarpus* showed about only 25% damage, and with the advent of spring began growing like a weed. It was my inexperienced opinion, and still is, that the early morning sun in the southern location minimized the length of time the leaves were exposed to subzero temperatures, and since the roots were heavily enough mulched to prevent freezing, transpiration was not a real problem.

Well, as every true palmateer already knows, collecting palms can fast become a full-blown addiction, and it wasn't long before I *had* to try out another species. At this point I was still ignorant of The Palm Society, so, my next inspiration was drawn from a trip I had once taken to Florida. On that trip the first palms I had spotted on my way south were *Butia capitata*. With the aid of a generous husband (he bought the palm while on a business trip and carried it back on the plane) I was able to obtain a 5 gallon sized specimen and promptly planted it out in the worst location possible. I must actually blame the *Butia* for this poor choice of planting sites. It was just so beautiful I had to show it off to the world, and the world, unfortunately, promenaded by on the west side of the house. In our area, this is the direction whence come the howling winter winds. Unfortunately, as the palm literature well knows, *Butia capitata* cannot withstand temperatures below zero. Fortunately, however, this particular *B. capitata* could not read, and with the aid of a plastic-covered wood frame withstood an ensuing temperature of −21° F. I must admit that by spring the poor thing resembled a giant spider more than it did a palm, but nonetheless it lived. This is far more than I could have done under similar circumstances.

1. This *Butia capitata* survived −21° F unscathed in the coziness of a lean-to shelter.

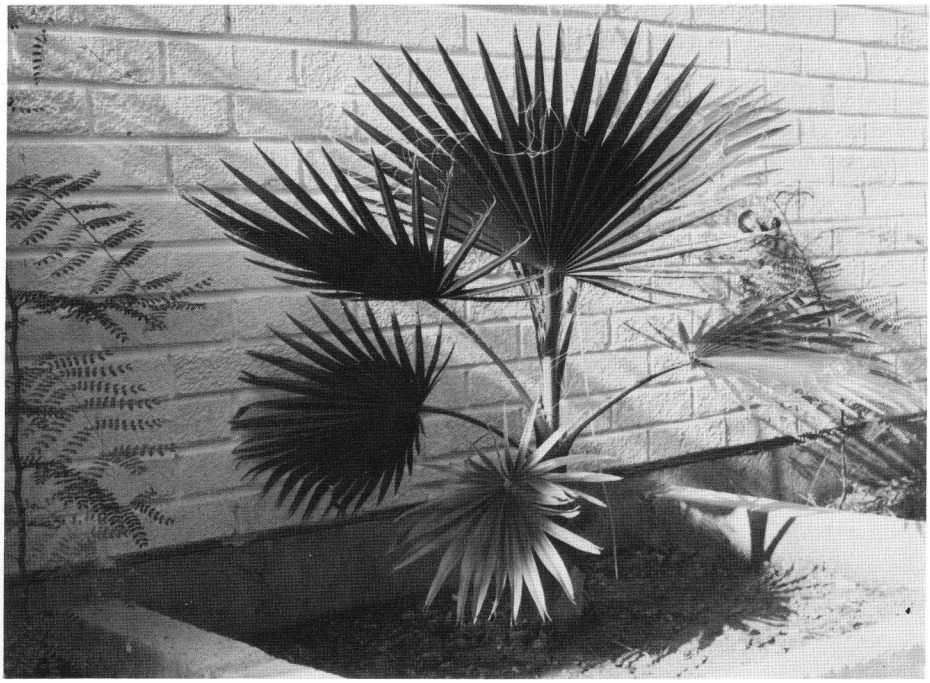
2. Although totally defoliated, with the center spear pulling loose, this *Chamaerops humilis* has made a complete recovery.

Then I discovered that I was not the only palm nut in the world and much too late, in my opinion, joined The International Palm Society. All at once big words like *Rhapidophyllum hystrix* were tripping over my tongue and much too late, in his opinion, my husband made a futile lunge for my pocketbook. *Much* too late. Palm fever had already struck, and being highly contagious, the disease rapidly enveloped him as well.

A mere seven years after that initial purchase in Texas finds us with 36 species of palms, ranging in height from 2 inches to 12 feet, and all planted permanently in the less than hospitable Ohio soil. How do we do it? Are we wizards? Of course we use a variety of gimmicks and techniques, ranging from simple piles of mulch for the hardiest species, to a portion of the backyard that is open in the summer and converted to "housedom" in the winter for species that don't even like to shiver. Now, in all honesty, our property resembles more the Belgian Congo of my memory than it does my neighbor's yard just feet away.

Do we ever incur losses? This past winter, the winter of 1983–84, we tied our all-time record low at this locality with a frond-numbing −21° F! Even a good deal of our palms that couldn't read succumbed to that. Are we discouraged? In no way! In spite of our heavy losses, we also experienced many successes, including some rather miraculous recoveries. Following are just three of many examples.

The *Butia* in Figure 1 survived unscathed in a shelter constructed out of old storm doors, 2 × 4's and the ubiquitous plastic. This shelter abutted the house at a junction with a window, and when the worst of the weather hit we simply opened the house window a crack. A piece of cake! The *Chamaerops humilis* in Figure 2 was slightly less fortunate. It shared the shel-



3. This *Washingtonia sp.* survived −21° F under an unheated plastic cover. The trunk had to be amputated half way down, but after just one growing season the palm has more than recovered its former size.

ter with the *Butia*, but it had the misfortune of being planted at the end of a "wing" of the shelter that extended around the side of the house—well away from any heat giving window. Hit by the cold while in active growth, this palm became defoliated and its emerging spear rotted back several inches. However, following a liberal dousing with fungicide and several months of hot weather, the palm has recovered and now sports a new crown of over a dozen leaves. The *Washingtonia* without a last name in Figure 3 survived −21° F in a totally unheated shelter! To be sure, the palm was defoliated, and in fact, the top half of the trunk turned to mush and had to be amputated. But now, with two months of the growing season still remaining, the palm has regained its trunk height, and more.

Well, does the above information intrigue you? Does it make you want to rush out and plant a palm in your now palmless plot? Have you long been green as a palm with envy while reading of other people's palm experiences in *Principes*? Have you always just assumed that a palm couldn't grow in your very own yard, and that you had to content yourself with a life of palm-voyeurism?

Well, fret no more! I am pleased to announce the official establishment of The Temperate Zone Chapter of The International Palm Society, Inc. We now have 120 members in 3 countries, and publish a quarterly journal devoted specifically to the issue of raising palms in frigid lands. As editor of this publication, and erstwhile leader of this enthusiastic flock, I will be more than happy to mail a free copy of *The Palm Quarterly* to anyone who requests one (persons living outside the U.S., Canada and Mexico please include $1 for postage). Our newly formed Chap-

ter welcomes everyone interested in growing palms in less than balmy climes, and who, for whatever reasons of their own, feel that this special interest group is just their cup of tea. Membership, which is tantamount to subscribing to *The Palm Quarterly*, is a mere $3 a year for persons living in the U.S., Mexico and Canada, and $5 for subscribers in other areas. This fee just covers costs for North Americans, and does not quite cover postal rates to other places.

My hope is that palmateers everywhere who have up until now been only vicarious participants on the palm scene, will take heart and do as much experimenting as their means allow. Sure, there will be bad winters and losses from time to time, but in my opinion there is nothing quite as satisfying as seeing a palm tree growing out in your own yard—especially if it is not supposed to be able to grow there in the first place. Happy planting!

The coast of northeastern Brazil has considerable numbers of coconut palms as well as active sand dunes. At Jenipabu Beach, some 8 km north of Natal, Rio Grande do Norte, there are both, but a sand dune has gained the upper hand. Beneath the dune in the photograph is a row of beach dwellings; the partially-buried coconut palms were formerly yard trees. According to the owner of the only remaining house, in the background, the dune has been slowly migrating to its present position over the last forty years. Eventually the coconut palms will be killed by the sand; in fact, most of those pictured are no longer producing mature fruits.

DENNIS JOHNSON