

## The Royal Palm Climbers of Cuba

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In Cuba, an island famed for its palms, no species is more familiar, widespread, or beautiful than the native royal palm or *palma real* (*Roystonea regia*). Besides gracing the lush green Cuban landscape, this tall handsome species also serves the country folk as a source of a number of utilitarian products.

Among the best known of these are the smallish fruits (11-13 mm. in diameter) which the Cubans call *palmitche*. These are borne in tremendous numbers in branching clusters attached at the summit of the smooth trunks at the point where the trunk joins the green crownshaft. *Palmitche*, with its high oil content, is the principal food used for feeding and fattening Cuban hogs as well as other stock. Thus it is a sort of tropical mast. As with most fruits, *palmitche* falls when it is dead ripe. For this reason it is generally gathered before fully mature so that the fruit may be more easily carried on its stalks from the fields or hills where the palms grow to where it will be used as stock food.

To harvest ripening *palmitche* from the lofty summits of palms which may reach up to 100 feet tall would seem a hopeless task to most of us. Actually, among Cuban country folk, there has been developed a special trade or craft, that of the so-called *trepadores* or royal palm climbers whose sole job it is to climb and harvest *palmitche*. Trained from youth, these men have developed a special technique of climbing the smooth boles of royal palms. Just how they do it has been well described by Thomas Barbour in his volume *A Naturalist in Cuba*, from which the following paragraphs have been excerpted with permission of Little, Brown and Company, Boston, publishers, and Atlantic Monthly Press. The accompanying photographs used here for illustrations are of a *tre-*

*pador* in action near Cienfuegos at the Atkins Garden of Harvard University at Soledad, the same spot described by Barbour.

"A trade highly characteristic of Cuba, which has considerable prestige among country folk, is that of the royal palm climbers or *trepadores*. Our neighbor in this profession at Soledad is a short, thick-set, rather silent little man who is always accompanied by his son as assistant. When we send for him, he comes with two long loops of strong rope draped over his shoulders. To each of these is attached a sort of stirrup, well padded to make it comfortable. The padding usually consists of strips cut from old sugar sacks. He puts each loop around the tree, and passes the stirrup through the bight of the loop. One stirrup is considerably longer than the other. Into one he pushes his leg as far as his knee, the other he catches on the ball of his foot. By seesawing back and forth he shifts his weight from one stirrup to the other. This makes it possible for him to push each loop alternately up the tree with his hands, a foot or more at a time. Thus he hitches his way up the tree in less than no time. When he gets to the top, to that smooth green region below the fronds, he stops and hangs an arm over one of these to steady himself. His trusty machete is hanging from his belt.

"Each cluster of *palmitche* is enormous, weighing perhaps fifty to sixty pounds. If one of these were chopped off and dropped directly to the ground, hundreds of the little berrylike fruits would be lost. Therefore he now removes from his belt a long coil of rope which has been worn smooth from long use. He makes this fast to the top of the tree and tosses the other end to his son, who carries it off and makes it fast at some little distance away to the trunk of a neighboring palm, being careful that the rope is stretched taut. Now when father chops the cluster of *palmitche* loose, it straddles the line which has been pulled as tight as possible: so it slides to the ground and is caught and slowed up before it hits the earth.

"The fruits are like small nuts, and when ground up make a most excellent hog feed so that each adult royal palm is

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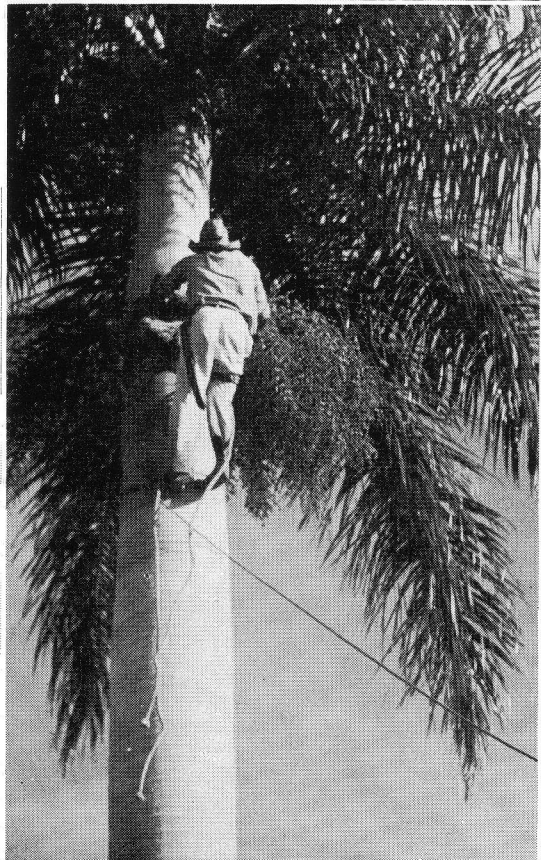




Fig. 15, top left:

"... he comes with two long loops of strong rope ... he puts each loop around the tree ..."

Fig. 16, top center:

"To each of these is attached a sort of stirrup, well padded to make it comfortable ... Into one [stirrup] he pushes his leg as far as his knee, the other he catches on the ball of his foot."

Fig. 17, top right:

"By seesawing back and forth he shifts his weight from one stirrup to the other [making] it possible ... to push each loop alternately up the tree ... Thus he hitches his way up the tree ..."



Fig. 18, bottom left:

"When he gets to the top ... he ... removes from his belt ... a rope which ... he makes ... fast to the top of the tree ..."

Fig. 19, bottom center:

"When [he] chops the cluster of *palmiche* loose, it straddles the [taut] line ... so it slides to the ground and is caught and slowed up before it hits the earth ..."

Fig. 20, bottom right:

"Each cluster of *palmiche* is enormous, weighing perhaps fifty to sixty pounds ..."

### PALM CLIMBERS (Cont.)

estimated to be worth a dollar a year in *palmiche* alone. By the country people the trees are classified as one hog or two hog trees according to the amount of fruit they produce.

"Of course this method of tree climb-

ing can only be used where the trunk of a palm is absolutely smooth. You could not climb a date palm this way. . . . The *trepadores* in Cuba travel far and wide in pursuit of their trade and, from the point of view of their countrymen, they make a very fair living."

### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The names of plants frequently prove perplexing. With the thought that some readers may enjoy knowing more about the meaning and the pronunciation of palm names, this column is begun to consider names. There is no standard guide to the pronunciation of plant names, and where English is spoken pronunciation sometimes varies from region to region. The suggested pronunciations, therefore, are by no means the only pronunciations, but they are based on the usual usage. An informal phonetic system will be used here and in later columns in which the vowels have fixed sounds: "a" either alone or at the end of a syllable as in the initial letter of *around*; "e" as in *pet*; "i" as in *if*; "o" as in *note*; "u" as in *up*. Except when it follows "n," the letter "g" should be pronounced as in *girl*: the diphthong "th" should be pronounced as in *thin*. Stressed syllables are indicated by an accent. Words from other languages do not always lend themselves to easy and pleasant pronunciation in English. Then, as in *Orbignya*, the anglicized form may differ greatly from the correct pronunciation in the language of origin.

Certain names for genera of plants have become so firmly fixed in botanical usage that they have been conserved by international botanical congresses over less familiar names that would otherwise replace them. There are eight of these names in the palms, or nine if *Desmoncus*, which does not actually require conservation, is included. These nine are the first names we consider.

*Arenga* (a réng ga) comes from the Malayan name *areng* used for *Arenga pinnata*.

*Chamaedorea* (cam ee dó ree a) is derived from a combination of the Greek words *chamai* (on the ground) and *dorea* (gift) perhaps from the generally low habit of the species, perhaps because the fruits are easily reached. Willdenow, who gave us the name, did not specify its meaning.

*Desmoncus* (dez món cuss) is a combination of two Greek words—*desmos* (band) and *ogkos* (hook)—and refers to the upper pinnae of the leaves which are modified into hooks in this genus of climbers.

*Maximiliana* (max i mil ee ay na) was named by Martius for the sponsor of his travels in Brazil, Maximilian Joseph I, once King of the Bavarians.

*Orbignya* (or big nee a) honors Alcide Dessalines d'Orbigny (1802-1857), a French naturalist and explorer who travelled in South America from 1826-1833 and whose palm collections were studied by Martius. If a French pronunciation is desired, a closer approximation would be "or bi nyée a."

*Pigafetta* (pig a fét ta) was not explained by Martius and Blume who first used it as a subgeneric name. One source suggests that it may honor A. Pigafetta who wrote an account of his voyage around the world with Magellan.

*Pritchardia* (pri chár dee a) was named for William T. Pritchard, once British Consul in the Fiji Islands and author of *Polynesian Reminiscences* (1866).

*Veitchia* (vée chee a) honors James Veitch (1792-1863), a British nurseryman.

*Washingtonia* (wash ing tó nee a) commemorates George Washington.