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Attempted Rules for the Deployment of Palms

Lester C. Pancoast

3351 Poinciana Avenue, Miami, FL 33133

It is sad that more palm lovers cannot travel about the world to see for themselves the magnificent palms which remain in the wild. Because the human animal does not control human population, wilderness is shrinking, changing, disappearing, as man-made environment is taking its place. Whether they are "Scandinavian" in concept, in which natural landscape is left with its original feeling more or less intact, or "Mediterranean," in which natural landscape is overcome with terraces and potted plants, rearrangements of nature by man are becoming increasingly necessary to his well-being.

There are many types of palm lovers, and they enjoy different intensities of involvement with palms. Some are trained in the art of landscape architecture. Some cause palms to be placed on highways, seashores, or great land projects. Others promote palms with urban or rural governments, or create or support botanic gardens. Most palm lovers, however, have their own personalized rearrangements of nature, which they believe will be recognizable and appreciated as gardens, as deserving "gardenhood." And if they have struggled with the joys and anguish of landscape design, they know that nature's demonstrations, however rich and wonderful, are not sufficient to resolve many of the problems and opportunities of man-made conditions. Perhaps man-made garden design problems suggest man-made rules to help with their solutions. Perhaps some palm lovers might enjoy ruminating on such rules.

Because the writer is an architect, he was recently approached by a man and his wife who had bought and intended to remodel an "old" house (early 1930s) on Miami Beach. They also bought an open and empty property adjacent to the house. Even on the first visit to the site, they were urged by the writer to create on the open property a collector's garden of palms, which could in time help to develop a rich outdoor space to expand the living areas of the house.

The idea of the palm garden was accepted with great enthusiasm. The writer was requested to help with a bibliography of writings which would provide the couple with rules or guidelines for designing their own garden, "over a period of years."

Disappointed not to be commissioned to design and help with the achievement of the garden, but understanding the financial wisdom of their course, the writer found several information sources on germinating, selecting, planting and growing palms, but no landscape theory dealing with designing a palm garden.

Fresh from Boston, the couple had brought with them keen minds, fine educations, and a desire to embrace everything tropical. Their determination to have white peacocks worried the writer because he thought it might indicate a lack of focus and persistence necessary to create a slowly developing palm garden. Important understandings were reached: that quieter exotic birds would better suit the neighbors, that any birds were preferable to dogs which dig in gardens, and that an open courtyard

of the house should be shaded to become a palm nursery to supply the garden as it evolved. The requested rules were to be prepared by the author. Although design and working drawings of the garden would have proven to be a simpler task than writing rules, the palm garden would be their own work and a brave attack on the *tabula rasa* next door.

It is probable that few palm lovers would admit that they need design rules with which to locate palms or to create a garden other than those rules supplied by their common sense and native sensitivity. Not all palm planters are palm lovers, but palm lovers have, by definition, potential to treat palms better. There are, regardless, so many poorly placed palms and so many poorly designed gardens that too few palm planters realize that the locating of any palm, anywhere, is an act of design, and that they are, whether they choose to think on it or not, responsible for the consequence of their acts. Perhaps simplistic rules could provoke responsibility and jog some imaginations without offending those who are totally certain of their own competence. With hope that some of the rules might even be easily remembered, they are written as short imperatives with examples and supportive thoughts.

Rule 1: Define Objectives

Will the chess game be played at a square table or round? Will the atmosphere be formal or informal, architectural or natural? What is the mood already established, and can it be enforced, extended, or changed? What are the purposes of the design, one must ask himself, and what mood will suit the purpose best? Aside from knowing one's palms and the personalities they project, how does one achieve a chosen mood? Is there a mental picture which can be described?

Rule 2: Preordain Space

What the zero does for mathematics, negative space (where nothing occurs

except space) does for landscape design. The crowded jungle or the crowded garden is enjoyable only because of the natural or man-made spaces which let one perceive it. If the negative space or spaces of a garden are well conceived and well understood, no palm will want to be planted which does such spaces harm. The opposite of the jungle garden is the open negative space of the Japanese Zen garden, where sparsely placed positive elements create tensions between them. (A Zen garden using palms is a challenge, perhaps not yet attempted.) Space is an indispensable design tool, and no growing things celebrate space better than palms.

Rule 3: Conjure Drama

Drama can be subtle, but the use of palms without a sense of drama is to lead them and their admirers into a "ho-hum" existence. Full blown palms are among the most innately dramatic devices in all of nature; planting with very young material can mean that the designer's drama must remain a private secret until the material begins finally to mature. To conjure drama is to create the most impact with the best devices at hand. Consider a few phrases among countless other possible ones which suggest the achievement of drama: the special subject brightly lighted, the powerful rhythm interrupted, the sculpture emphasized, the tall and slender made doubly so by reflection, the familiar form in astonishing repetition, a framed view of the unexpected.

Rule 4: Behold the Single Palm

It is easier for many palm lovers to be enthralled by the single palm, by the miracle of the palm itself, than to fully grasp that it must exist in a perceived space, in a particular place, and in relation to a set of visual circumstances. (So much for the care-free, spontaneous act of planting a palm.) While a magnificent individual palm can thoroughly qualify an expansive scene, too often an insufficient specimen or inad-



1. The median of arid highway U.S. 1 boasts miles of unhappy *Carpentaria acuminata*.

equating species is required to perform the task, looking incidental or even forlorn. The so-called "dooryard palm," labeled for those who might indulge a "pet palm" as a concession to living in a place where one can be grown, is too seldom selected to have sufficient character to deserve a dooryard. Single palms alone in an empty front yard or used as the only palm in the garden need size or character sufficient to handle the role. The most difficult garden to design must be the collection of singles typical of the collector who discovers and obtains one palm of each species and plants them all together. Some gardens offer special single gems in separated settings. David Fairchild grew a fifteen foot *Chamadorea metallica*, all by itself, with its one half inch diameter trunk, in the center of a shaded glade.

Rule 5: Stay with the Crowd

Although nature sometimes mixes palms which do not flatter and even become confused with each other, her usual example

is the presence of many of the same kind of palm or palms placed together. Says Roberto Burle Marx, the celebrated Brazilian landscape architect who has worked extensively with palms in his urban parks and plazas, "They are marvelous, one kind at a time, but I do not like to see them all mixed up together." Grouping, however, cannot always solve the selection of an inadequate or ill suited palm. For example, someone with good intentions recently bought and planted groups of *Carpentaria acuminata* in the wild, dry median strips of Highway U.S. 1 south of Miami; their effect and their future is bleak (Fig. 1). Someone else saved the royal palms on Biscayne Boulevard when the new people mover was installed, but unfortunately preserved also the regular cadence of the rows with palms of irregular height; irregularly spaced, the same palms would have merely looked informal, rather than ill-matched because of inevitable damage, disease, or uneven growth (Fig. 2).



2. One of several ill-fated *Carpentaria acuminata* and regularly spaced, irregularly sized *Roystonea regia* on Miami's Biscayne Boulevard.

Rule 6: Co-mingle with Care

Who has not reached out for a prize at the smorgasbord without knowing where or how it could be used? Matching palm personalities takes the same ability needed to create a successful dinner party. Some palms will not even talk to each other. A list of antisocial palms should certainly include *Neodypsis decaryi*, *Wallichia disticha*, *Verschaffeltia lagenicaulis*, *Johannesteijsmannia altifrons* and the like, which are simply too elegant or eccentric to be matched with anything but their own species. Although their visual personalities are entirely at odds, coconuts are often unaccountably intermixed with washingtonias; *Washingtonia robusta* intermixed with *Sabal Palmetto* can put ones teeth on edge. Almost similar palms often detract from each other through confu-

sion, and the otherwise sociable, oversized giants such as *Roystonea* have bad habits of throwing massive brown fronds down upon tender neighbors (Figs. 3,4,5).

Rule 7: Curb Polarization

In the parlor, the open field, or the garden, two identical design elements can create what is known as an unresolved duality, which "Polarizes" a composition, causing the viewer to look back and forth between the two without knowing why. The duality is resolved when the reason becomes clear, that the two elements announce and formalize an entrance, for example. The problem is commonly avoided by designers by the purposeful use of odd numbers of elements or of odd numbers or of family groups (mother and child, father, mother and child, etc.). All of the world's cultures carefully avoid matched pairs without a purpose.

Rule 8: Palms Grow

Even the most experienced grower sometimes loses the three dimensional chess game of what each palm should do and what each palm will in fact do. A palm garden is a study of hopeful probabilities and of avoiding future disasters (Fig. 6). The massive mango tree and the exploding *Corypha umbraculifera* planted beneath it at Fairchild Tropical Garden wish now to occupy the same space (Fig. 7). An enormous number of unhappy palms rise up to challenge the power lines of Miami, and in that city's downtown area, where palms are assisting with regional identity, a series of *Carpentaria acuminata* are mashing their crowns against the projecting beams of a major building under which they were planted (Fig. 2). Ignorance or dishonesty shows in landscape efforts where large numbers of small *Livistona chinensis* are used as a ground cover, only to grow into a mass of unhappy palms (Fig. 8).



3. In the department of total confusion, a young *Cocos nucifera* challenges an older *Syagrus schizophylla*.

Rule 9: Aggrandize the Superb

The elements of architectural infrastructure—terracing, walls, lighting, gates, paths, pools, objects of interest, places to

sit—all are design opportunities, but however well done, these elements cannot substitute for the placing of palms in such a way that their best features become evi-



4. *Neodypsis decaryii*, popular in south Florida, wants to be alone.



5. *Hyophorbe lagenicaulis* and *Pseudophoenix sargentii* do their best visually to survive each other's company.



6. Poorly matched *Sabal* sp. and *Phoenix* sp. must contort to escape planted niche.



7. Fairchild Tropical Garden's teenaged *Corypha umbraculifera* challenges sheltering trees.

dent. If sculpture or individuality is to be shown, provide visual breathing space; if crown or fruit or fine trunk are the focus, they should be made to show. Some palms have exceptional feet: stilt roots, bell-shaped bases, or clamboring roots, like those of otherwise lackluster *Gaussia attenuata*. Someday a small garden within a fine building will be made of white gravel and three *Verschaffeltia splendida*, so compelling that it will fascinate the world.

Rule 10: Create Synergy

The truly enlightened deployment of palms requires several kinds of intelligence simultaneously energized, a simple matter of combining a logical, well thought out program, a knowledge of palms and how to grow them, and inspired design analysis—nothing more than that. After a generation of time observing the evolving results, one might one day have a sense



8. Originally used as a ground cover, these *Livistona chinensis* have grown into a competitive mass.

of how closely the effort had approached the sublimity of success.

These, then, are the attempted rules, to date. If the writer sounds as if he believes he is speaking from Mount Olympus, it

should be understood that many of his rules were inspired by his own mistakes, and further, that he firmly believes any rule should be broken if it interferes with more powerful inspiration.

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