

My Forty-Two Years as a Palmophile

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My palmophilic affair began at about age ten, when I saw Tarzan pictures at the movies. Naturally, at the time, I didn't know anything about palms, but was fascinated with the jungle scenes. Back then, movies were made in California, so I probably was looking at howeias, washingtonias, and arecastrums. I was captivated with the tropics and vowed to live in Africa when I grew up. The fact that I froze in the New York City winters and did not enjoy snow even as a child may have had some influence in my young love affair with the lands of constant warmth.

Adding to my interest were stories that my father told me about his homeland, the tropical island of Puerto Rico. I was particularly impressed that broad-leaved trees remained green during the winter. After turning twenty, I had an opportunity to visit Puerto Rico and actually see palms and other tropicals. As expected, the coconut palm proved to be my favorite.

The first plant I ever purchased was a palm, *Chrysalidocarpus lutescens*. It thrived in New York (indoors) until it was brought to California and was over-examined by the state agriculture inspectors. Need I say more? As yet, I had no knowledge whatsoever of tropical plants, only that I loved the varied exotic shapes and colors of them and the climate they represented.

As a young adult, my childhood vow to move to Africa was modified to live in California, Arizona, Florida, or Puerto Rico. In 1961, my wife, two young children and I arrived in California to live in the tropics, or so I thought. Frankly, I expected Los Angeles to be more like San Juan and

Miami, and was somewhat shocked and disappointed with the cool, dry California version of the tropics. For a number of years, my wife and I debated whether to stay here or move to Florida or Puerto Rico. Economics won out—we stayed.

When we purchased our home in Orange County, seven miles from the beach, I had no idea that I would become a full fledged fanatical plantaholic or how to deal with the climate variations of the area. My first project was to landscape my 60' × 105' (20 m × 30 m) corner lot. When visiting nurseries, I naturally selected the common varieties of tropical plants available at the time. This included ferns, palms, citrus, ficus, and various aroids. My first spring and summer plantings proved to be much more than just enjoyable and satisfying. I often got up at 5:30 A.M. and worked until 9:00 P.M. planting and landscaping. Despite my sunup to sundown "hobby," it wasn't long until I once again became completely enthralled with the "jungle" and began reading everything I could find pertaining to the tropics. While searching the library shelves, I came across Desmond Muirhead's book on palms. I concluded that I must like palms, since I was already growing about 21 species. I joined The Palm Society which turned out to be one of the best decisions of my life and have always been grateful to Dent Smith, our founder.

My first Palm Society meeting was at the Los Angeles County Arboretum in August 1966. That meeting left me somewhat confused because of all the botanical names. It wasn't until attending the next meeting at Ed Moore's home in San Diego

that I became a true palmologist. His gardens were incredible and full of rare palms. The following year turned out to be the most exciting, adventurous year of my life. I became completely involved in learning, reading, germinating, planting, and collecting palms, and building a 9' × 12' × 7' (3 m × 4 m × 2 m) high plastic greenhouse. After visiting Pauleen Sullivan in Ventura and Jim Specht, I became determined to build a large two story greenhouse somewhat like theirs.

In 1969, I obtained a permit to build an 18' high 20' × 30' (3 m × 7 m × 10 m) greenhouse attached to my single story house. Fiberglass was used for the ceiling and clear plastic for the sides. In an attempt to duplicate the tropics, I installed misters on the ceiling so that when activated, a fine mist would descend onto the plants below. It gave the incredibly authentic feeling of being transported to the rain forests. Unfortunately, I soon discovered the ill effects of minerals in our Colorado based water. Every palm turned from luscious green to chalky white as a result of the minerals becoming deposited on the leaf surfaces. I spent hours rubbing off the powder and polishing each leaf of every plant. The mister heads soon become clogged, requiring me to climb an 18' (6 m) ladder to clean the system. After a year of unclogging misters and cleaning leaves, I had enough. The system was dismantled and moved closer to ground level.

Not long after building the greenhouse, I planted *Verschaffeltia splendida*, *Phoenicophorium borsigianum*, and *Cyrtostachys renda* in the ground. The *Verschaffeltia* was about 12' high when I layed down a mulch of cow manure which apparently was too strong. The next day, my three most prized palms were dead. Not until this year have I been able to grow those same three species to respectable sizes.

As some of the rare or tropical seedlings started to grow in size, I began to plant some outdoors. I remember, in particular,

planting *Veitchia joannis* next to the wall on the south side of the house. Several years later, I related that fact to David Barry, one of the pre-eminent palm pioneers. He outrightly proclaimed that it was impossible and insisted *Veitchia* wouldn't grow in California. Jim Specht, another palm pioneer, was more encouraging by commenting that it might live until it reached the eave of the house. As it was, the palm didn't pay attention to either one of them. It grew to have over two feet of bare trunk above the roof of the house, and would still be there, I'm sure, had not a tree branch fallen on the trunk of the *Veitchia* and sheared it in half!

As time went on, my palm fever worsened. My wife found that the palms started to encroach more and more onto the lawn area. As trees begin to multiply in number and grow taller, lawn grass no longer flourished in the diminished light. Likewise, newly acquired sun-loving palms refused to thrive in my shaded garden. In search of new places to grow palms, I started to invade the neighborhood.

I noticed that the tree planted by the city in the parkway was ugly in every respect. So, I cut it down to make room for a palm. My panic-stricken wife was sure that city officials would lock me up and throw away the key. When no one came for me, I planted another palm and then another. After several years, over thirty palms grew at various intervals down the parkway strip. Finally, city personnel made an appearance, and not only approved my landscaping, but allowed me to plant palms in the entire neighborhood circle. I also convinced them to plant arecastrums (now *Syagrus romanoffiana*) on the main street and to add *Archontophoenix* along a main thoroughfare and in city parks.

For a number of years, I needed another greenhouse better exposed to sunlight. The only place that qualified was on top of my house. I built a geodesic dome greenhouse

and mounted it on the roof. It is about 10' across and 7' high and is used to start seeds and push along small tropical palms.

Two years ago, I decided to tear down my ageing two story greenhouse, build another, and correct all the original mistakes. The new one has a cement foundation, sliding glass patio doors, and glass walls. It was a lot harder for me to build because I had to tear down the old one, and found that panes of glass are harder to handle than flexible, unbreakable plastic. Besides, I was 16 years older!

In addition to landscaping the new greenhouse, I also removed all the grass in the front parkway strip, conditioned the soil, and planted additional palms, cycads, and ferns among lava rock boulders. I also provided a means of protecting the area from hot, dry winds by building a moveable lattice structure. It can be put up when the winds blow and later removed when the winds abate. Future projects will be to build a waterproof deck adjacent to my two story family room and to erect a solar room addition.

During the last twenty years, I have planted out *Neodypsis decaryi* and *Ceroxylon* only to have lost several of them. I have continuously tried to grow these two species but none has yet reached five feet in height. I would not be so persistent except other Palm Society members in the area have great success with them. However, I have had good luck with viable seed from my *Caryota urens* and *Areca catechu* which has its roots in the greenhouse

and its crown growing through the roof, exposed to the open sky. I hope to soon have seed from my *Ptychosperma elegans*, *Coccothrinax dussiana*, *Chrysalidocarpus madagascariensis* var. *lucubensis*, and *Copernicia alba*.

In the two story greenhouse, I have *Verschaffeltia*, *Licuala grandis*, a 7' tall *Zombia* which I will also try to let grow through the roof. Also growing here are *Heterospathe negrosensis*, *Cocos nucifera*, *Rhapis humilis*, clumping pinanga, and *Chrysalidocarpus cabadae*. Outside in the garden, my tallest palms are *Washingtonia robusta* and *Caryota urens*, about 60' (30 m) tall. I trim the leaves on the Mexican fan palms myself, and up there, they seem a lot taller. I look forward to planting *Jubaeopsis caffra* next spring, and have saved a special place for it.

At this time, I have ground planted over 250 palms, and my biggest problem is space. I not only collect palms, but rare ferns, fruit trees, cycads, and aroids. How to house all these plants and try to make it aesthetic is no small task. It would be impossible if I lived in the true tropics where plants might grow too fast and too large. So, I am lucky to live in California, after all.

Some day, we are hoping to spend part of the year in the tropics and part of the year in California. That way, we'll have the best of both worlds.

Note: This article received fourth prize in the *Principes* contest. Eds.

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PALM SEEDLINGS. *Johannesteijsmannia magnifica*, *Kerriodoxa elegans*, *Zombia antillarum*, *Cryosophila argentea*, *Coccothrinax crinata*, and many more. Please send return envelope for listing. C. GRAFF, 6600 SW 45 St., Miami, FL 33155. 305-666-1457.

SEED WANTED. *Brahea elegans*, *Trachycarpus takil*, *T. wagnerianus*, *Butia bonnettii*, *B. eriostatha*, *Livistona rigida*, *L. drudei*. JIM FARRELL, 3075 Old Windmill Road, Sun City, CA 92381. 714-672-2673.