

PALM LITERATURE

TIMBER PRESS POCKET GUIDE TO PALMS. Robert L. Riffle, Timber Press, Portland, Oegon. 2008. ISBN 13:978-088192-776-4. US\$19.95. Paperback. 237 pp.

Most palm books are large, heavy and unwieldy, seemingly more designed for the coffee table than for backpacks or pockets. Even so, attendees at any chapter meeting may well be lugging around one of these monster books, very likely Riffle and Craft's earlier success, *An Encyclopedia of Cultivated Palms* (2003).

Robert Lee Riffle was working on a cut-down version of that book at his untimely death in August, 2006. That whispery, husky voice with undertones of his native Louisiana will be heard no more. But his memory is well served by this guidebook, which is light, small (6 × 8.38 inches), and definitely portable. In some palm books, the intended audience is not entirely clear. For beginners? For veteran hobbyist-growers? The new Riffle book contains all the basic information on palm culture and landscape uses, together with lists for particular needs, locations or growth rates that is necessary and useful to those just starting out with palms. For those well beyond that stage, the selection of species offers an assortment of more rare and difficult palms. Common and scientific names appear together in the index.

Basic information is provided on 200 species of palms (including a few hybrids). Not only are the dimensions of trunks, leaves and inflorescences given, but also information on the habitat, salt tolerance, growth rate, seed germination and potential indoor use. Most entries end with little more than a sentence or two of comment, surely the hardest part of this book for Bob (not a clipped, short-winded

person). Still, he manages – as in the previous book – to tell the reader, more often than not, that each palm is beautiful.

The pictures are particularly good, but there are a few puzzles. For one, the caption reads “*Arenga engleri* flowers” but there are no flowers, only petiole bases. For *Copernicia macroglossa*, the picture, inexplicably, shows an older individual that has no petticoat. For *Serenoa repens*, the only picture of the plant shows atypical, single, 15-foot trunks in deepest interior Central Florida rather than the shrubby individuals more commonly seen. Bob is impatient with *Serenoa*, which he thinks boring in the wild but much improved “in a shrub border or mixed with tall but not overly umbrageous trees.” Were he alive, this phrase alone would have merited a phone call to him with my objections. The only leaf pictured of the species is the silver form, not the common green. Quite a few species of *Chamaedorea*, *Copernicia*, *Dypsis*, *Licuala* and *Pinanga* are listed.

Those who shepherded this book through publication have made a few mistakes – what is a palm book without mistakes? No, not *Phoenix roebelinii* but *P. roebelenii*. The old USDA cold hardiness zones are used for every listing; all those old palms in my Zone 9B Florida garden should not be growing here. Or, possibly, the palms know something the USDA zones do not. The individual entries do not always make clear that a species will grow in Mediterranean or in wet (read: Florida) climates.

Overall, Riffle's posthumous book is a quality production that most palm enthusiasts will want to have.

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