

# The Nabonnand Family and Palms

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1. *Washingtonia filifera*, *Livistona chinensis* in the nursery of Paul and Clément Nabonnand around 1900.



The French nurseryman, Gilbert Nabonnand, and his two sons, Paul and Clément, introduced and acclimatized a multitude of exotic plants in the gardens of the Côte d'Azur, in the south of France. In less than a century they also created more than 300 varieties of roses. Paul Nabonnand chose to specialize in the hybridization of palms and produced two notable hybrids.

Gilbert Nabonnand (1828–1903) was born in Grézolles, in the department of La Loire, France. After having trained with nurserymen in his native region he set up his own nurseries in Sorgues and later in Avignon. In 1855 an event changed the course of his career: the Englishman Henry Peter Brougham, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron

Brougham and Vaux (1778–1868), hired him to design and plant the garden surrounding the Villa Eleanor Louise, the splendid property he had built in Cannes. In the ten years that followed, Gilbert Nabonnand planted an incomparable collection of exotic plants; *Araucaria*, *Eucalyptus*, *Ficus*, *Phoenix* and *Syagrus*

were planted throughout the grounds. Having built the first villa in Cannes, Brougham was followed by other wealthy English aristocrats who also called upon Nabonnand to design and plant their gardens.

In 1864 Gilbert Nabonnand transferred his nursery operations to Golfe-Juan, bringing him closer to his clientele. The nurseries overflowed with rare plants, to the point that J. Benjamin Chabaud (1833–1915), another figure in the acclimatization of palms to France and director of the Marine Botanical Garden in Toulon, wrote in 1882, "It would be difficult to give the names of all the plants cultivated here; suffice it to say that the palms, whether in pots or in the ground, are grown here by the thousands and all the other most desirable plants for our southern gardens are found here as well." (Chabaud 1882).

Renowned creators of exquisite varieties of roses, Gilbert and his two sons, Paul (1860–1937) and Clément (1864–1949), utilized their knowledge of the techniques of hybridization to improve other plants. While roses were their specialty, they worked with palms, in particular, seeking to create a variety of date palm capable of ripening its fruit on the northern Mediterranean coast. Following the death of their father, the two sons took over

the family business (Figs. 1 & 2) until it was sold in 1908. At that time they each chose different directions: Clément set up business in Villeneuve-Loubet and continued the work with roses, while Paul stayed in Golfe-Juan where he acclimatized more and more exotic plants. He also continued the hybridization of palms and created two remarkable hybrids: *×Butyagrus nabonnandii* and *Phoenix × nabonnandii*.

*×Butyagrus nabonnandii* (Prosch.) Vorster

*Butia capitata* (Mart.) Becc. *× Syagrus romanzoffiana* (Chamisso) Becc.

Around 1890, Paul Nabonnand (Fig. 3) fertilized the flowers of a *Butia capitata* var. *pulposa*, a variety with bigger fruit no longer distinguished from the type, with pollen harvested from *Syagrus romanzoffiana* var. *australis*. This southern variety of queen palm, described by Odoardo Beccari in 1916, has narrow seeds pointed at the extremities but is today included within the typical variety. The hybrids obtained from this cross were heterogeneous and exceptionally beautiful. Visiting the Nabonnand nurseries in order to survey the damage following the hard frosts of December 16 and 17, 1920, Axel Robertson Proschowsky (1857–1944) was stunned when

2. *Syagrus romanzoffiana* and *Brahea edulis* at the same time in the nursery.



he came upon a specimen growing in Paul's garden. This eccentric Danish doctor owned a fantastic garden called "Les Tropiques" on the hillsides of Mont Fabron in Nice and was one of the most extensive collections of exotic plants on the Côte d'Azur. Planted starting in 1895 it included, at its peak, before the brutal winters of 1920 and 1929, one hundred and twenty five species of palms in the ground. It was, according to many, the widest collection ever assembled in Europe. In the French magazine, *La Revue Horticole*, Axel Robertson Proschowsky proposed to name Nabonnand's hybrid "*Butiarecastrum Nabonnandi*" creating a nothogenus, joining together the names of the two parents of the hybrid and dedicating the specific epithet to its breeder (Proschowsky 1921). As the genus *Arecastrum* has disappeared, being replaced by *Syagrus*, the new name *Butyagrus* was made by the South African botanist Piet Vorster in 1990.

The Nabonnand nurseries sold the hybrid in the early twentieth century after which it was more or less forgotten. It was in the United-States that, by chance, Paul Nabonnand's creation was rediscovered. In 1949 some

strange palms, which turned out later to be  $\times$ *Butyagrus*, showed up in a nursery in Leesburg, Florida. Three of these crosses were planted in Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Miami and caught the eye of biologist Sidney F. Glassman who named them *Syagrus*  $\times$  *fairchildensis* (Glassman 1971). Since, at that time, the genus *Butia* was included within *Syagrus*, Glassman thought that he was in the presence of an interspecific hybrid that had not been previously described. He no doubt was unaware of the article written by Axel Robertson Proschowsky forty years earlier. Afterward, Harold E. Moore brought Proschowsky's publication to the attention of the palm community, clarifying that the hybrid must be named  $\times$ *Butiarecastrum nabonnandii* according to the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature (Moore 1982).

At the same time, in France, no other nurseryman sought to reproduce the cross, making  $\times$ *Butyagrus* particularly rare in gardens. Today fewer than ten adult specimens are still growing on the French Riviera. Four of them were rediscovered in 1997 in Villeneuve-Loubet by Pierre-Olivier Albano, former vice-president of "Fous de Palmiers," the French palm society and founder of the new sister society, "Ti Palm," which serves members on the French islands of the Caribbean as well as French Guyana. The Villeneuve-Loubet palms are quite different from each other: "One is quite airy, close to a *Syagrus* in appearance without being plumose while the stockiest specimen more closely resembles a *Butia*." (Albano 2001). These palms are growing in the garden of a modern apartment building, on the grounds of the former property of Clément Nabonnand, known as "Lou Mas di Roso" (Front Cover).

3. Paul Nabonnand (1860–1937). Photograph illustrating his obituary published in the journal *Les amis des roses*.



*Phoenix*  $\times$  *nabonnandii* P. Nabonnand

(*Phoenix canariensis* Chab.  $\times$  *Phoenix reclinata* Jacq.)  $\times$  *Phoenix roebelenii* O'Brien

At the end of the nineteenth century Paul Nabonnand experimented with *Phoenix* hybridization. An un-named hybrid was born of a cross between *Phoenix canariensis* and *P. reclinata*. This one, with "longer and more graceful fronds" (Nabonnand 1933) grew vigorously, to a height of between 5 and 6 m in just 35 years. Around 1915, Paul Nabonnand succeeded, with great difficulty, in fertilizing the female flowers of the un-named hybrid with pollen of *P. roebelenii*. Since the two palms do not flower at the same time,



4. *Phoenix* × *nabonnandii* in the royal greenhouses of Laeken (Photo: Frédéric Calmant).

the pollen had to be preserved from one year to the next, and two attempts were necessary. Nabonnand named the hybrid *Phoenix nabonnandii* and presented it, in 1933, at the International Florales Exposition in Gand,

Belgium. He received first prize for this new palm. He gave the palm to Elisabeth of Bavaria, the queen consort of Albert I of Belgium, when she visited the exposition on April 28. It was planted in the royal greenhouses of Laeken, in

the location recommended by Nabonnand himself and it is there to this day, growing in the winter garden. This *Phoenix* × *nabonnandii*, the only one of its kind in Europe, has a curved trunk 25 cm in diameter and 5 m tall; it is supported to prevent its collapse (Fig. 4). Inflorescences regularly emerge from the crown of leaves. From an historic point of view, Nabonnand's *Phoenix* hybrid is also outstanding because it is the first instance of a palm hybrid involving three species.

Gilbert Nabonnand owned a garden called "Le Cottage," next to his nursery. Located in Golfe-Juan, on the road to Cannes, it had a particularly protected microclimate. Tree ferns, cycads and palms such as *Brahea edulis*, *Phoenix sylvestris*, *P. reclinata*, *L. decora* and *Washingtonia filifera* flourished here. Unfortunately, in the second half of the twentieth century, after the deaths of Paul and Clément, their properties, nurseries and plantings disappeared, victims of the urbanization of the Mediterranean coastline.

Today forty varieties of roses and these two palms are all that remains of the prestigious work carried out by these two generations of nurserymen.

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