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Discovering Palms in Europe

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People coming to my nursery frequently want to know what made me give up a professional career 13 years ago to start exclusively growing palms. In the beginning I wondered myself, but eventually I realized that ever since I was a little boy growing up in Europe, palms were something special to me. Even at an early age I always had the urge to travel to see the world, to know what was beyond the mountains on the horizon. Palms were the symbol of the exotic, the faraway places of different people and plenty of sunshine. I'm sure palms must convey the same images to most people who get hooked on them. This is nowhere so obvious as when you visit the colder areas of the world. I'd like to describe a few such places in Europe but I know there are also localities elsewhere in cold climates with a variety of palms.

Palermo

Having finalized my business in Sicily, I was taken on my last day to the Palermo Botanical Garden, a somewhat neglected but charming park with a large collection of subtropical plants. There were the usual species of the following genera one finds in temperate subtropical areas: *Sabal*, *Trachycarpus*, *Washingtonia*, *Syagrus*, *Phoenix*, etc. What I especially remember are most magnificent specimens of a *Trithrinax campestris* with a trunk perhaps 7 m tall and a large proliferation of *Chamaerops humilis*, the Mediterranean fan palm. It is really outstanding to see the incredible variety within this one species. There were nonsuckering types with short

fat trunks, thinly stemmed, densely suckering ones with quite small crowns, and all sorts of combinations between these extremes. Some had small leaves, others bigger fans, and the coloring of the leaves ranged from grass green to grey blue. All of this variety is called *Chamaerops humilis*.

Porto Ercole

Some time ago I saw a reference in *Principes* to a garden in Porto Ercole (corresponding roughly in latitude to Northern Tasmania, Wellington, New Zealand, Southern Hokaido, or Boston) in Italy which was supposed to contain many palms planted in the middle of the last century. Because of the passage of time, neglect, and war, the names of the surviving species were apparently very much in doubt. Once I knew I was going to be in Italy, I decided to go and see if I could identify the palms. In Rome I teamed up with Carol Graff of Tropical Landscaping in Miami. It was a pleasant train journey on a beautiful summer day, which took us north along the West Coast to Porto Ercole and the peninsula of Monte Argentario, an area well known for its beauty and benign climate, and also steeped in history and full of interesting people, which it has produced over the centuries. Our host, the owner of "La Casa Blanca," was expecting us and received us at the gate of his fabled estate. He is Don Cino dei Principi Corsini Marchese di Laiatico, who, however, prefers to be addressed simply as Cino. We had a fascinating day with Cino, who despite a broken leg, hobbled all over the vast

estate on the slopes of Monte Argentario which overlooks a very beautiful small harbor. There were stories of nobility, of national heroes, composers and inventors, artists and patriots, saintly people and thieves, but above all, of idealistic people with visions and ideas. All shared one thing; they were connected in some way with this place and were part of its history.

The garden was founded by Cino's ancestor, Baron General Vincenzo Ricasoli, an officer in the Piedmontese Cavalry under the Savoy King, when Italy consisted of many small kingdoms and was not united as we know it now. The King of Savoy had agreed to help Britain and France against the Russians. So in 1850 the Baron was sent with his Sardinian Cavalry to battle in the Crimean War. A Russian cannon ball put an end to his war efforts by smashing one of his legs. He then sailed back to Porto Ercole with 37 Russian war prisoners whom he had captured before the accident. They were kept in an ancient fortress above the harbor, from which they were taken every day to work in his park. The once steep slope was thus converted into flat terraces ideally suited for planting. The Baron, who was a self taught botanist, then set forth to travel the tropical and subtropical world and during the rest of his life he brought back thousands of plants for his garden. It is estimated that in his final days the park had one of the finest collections of subtropical plants in Europe. It particularly excelled in a very large variety of *Eucalyptus*, but of course there were palms and cycads. In 1888 Baron Ricasoli published a book with a list of all the plants in his garden. The list is long and often states the same species under several different names. Also many species have been through a variety of botanical name changes over the last 100 years depending on the latest insight or whimsy of the botanists of the day. Here then, is a modern version of the list of palms we think were in the Baron's garden in 1888.

Allagoptera campestris
 Archontophoenix alexandrae
 Brahea armata
 B. edulis
 Butia yatay
 Ceroxylon alpinum
 Chamaedorea elatior
 C. elegans
 Chamaerops humilis
 Coccothrinax argentea
 Cryosophila nana
 Hedyscepe canterburyana
 Howea belmoreana
 H. forsteriana
 Jubaea chilensis
 Linospadix monostachya
 Livistona australis
 L. chinensis
 Lytocaryum weddellianum
 Nannorrhops ritchiana
 Phoenix acaulis
 P. canariensis
 P. dactylifera
 P. × intermedia, (P. dactylifera × P. canariensis)
 P. paludosa
 P. pusilla
 P. reclinata
 P. rupicola
 P. sylvestris
 Polyandrococos caudescens
 Ptychosperma elegans
 Rhaps excelsa
 Rhopalostylis baueri
 R. sapida
 Sabal blackburnia
 S. mauritiiformis
 S. mexicana
 S. minor
 S. palmetto
 S. princeps
 Syagrus flexuosa
 S. macrocarpa
 S. romanzoffiana
 Thrinax parviflora
 Trachycarpus fortunei
 Washingtonia filifera
 W. robusta

Included in the original 1888 listing are the following palm names which have defied my resources to work out their modern names:

Cocos gaertneri (=Syagrus macrocarpa)
 Phoenix aequinoctialis
 P. peradenia
 P. peruviana
 P. sahariensis
 Sabal longifolia

S. longipedunculata
S. speciosa
S. tectorum

After the death of the Baron, the garden gradually fell into neglect for all sorts of reasons, including lack of water which killed a lot of palms. During World War II, the estate with the stately villa, became the regional headquarters for the German troops. One of the first official acts was to remove the beautifully made porcelain name tags that all palms and most other plants wore for botanical identification. Towards the end of German occupation the whole estate was bombed by the allies, which of course caused enormous damage. Many palms were lost and many still bear the wounds—as seen by trunks with big chunks blasted out and others with two crowns indicating damage to the growing tip. So what is left are the tough survivors, palms 100 years old and older, those that can take lack of water and care, and the occasional frost or cold winter which can be extreme in Europe once every 25 years. Here then is a list of what we believe to be growing there now:

Brahea armata
B. edulis
Chamaerops humilis
Jubaea chilensis
Livistona australis
L. chinensis
Nannorrhops ritchiana
Phoenix canariensis
P. dactylifera
P. sylvestris
Sabal mauritiiiformis
S. minor
Syagrus romanzoffiana
Trachycarpus fortunei
Washingtonia filifera
W. robusta

Chamaerops humilis has established itself to such an extent that it is self seeding and has taken over whole areas, almost smothering anything else growing. The *Nannorrhops ritchiana* is the most beautiful specimen I have ever seen, with several bent trunks up to 1.5 m long, one

trunk branching at about 1.2 m. All in all we found it not easy to identify some of the palms due to their great age, height, damage, distortion, and climate induced growing habits. The above list is reasonably accurate but could include some more species of *Phoenix* and *Sabal*.

In conclusion it must be said that in 1888 when all the plants growing in this estate were listed, they must have represented a most ambitious and remarkable collection of palms and other plants. The variety of palms was probably unequalled anywhere in Europe with the possible exception of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew.

We also noted that the majority of survivors were the rough trunked palms, having good insulation against the cold. Gone were all those with crown-shafts, obviously not able to protect themselves against sudden temperature drops.

Locarno

Locarno (latitude equivalent to Montreal and the most southern part of New Zealand) is located on the shores of Lake Maggiore in the southern, Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. The lake lies across the border of Italy and Switzerland, an area which is usually referred to as the Lake District. Here the weather is extremely benign due to the protection of the alps, steep mountains rising out of the lakes in the north, reflected warmth from the large expanse of water, and winds from the warmer south. Anyone who has ever been to this very picturesque area, would be astonished by the proliferation of palms, particularly *Trachycarpus fortunei* of which I doubt one will find finer specimens anywhere in the world. Whole streets in Locarno are lined with the tallest palms in immaculate condition. There is also a 120-year-old *Jubaea chilensis* as part of a traffic island and, along the lake shore, we found the most perfect specimen of *Brahea armata*, reputedly also about 120

years old. Near Locarno is Isola di Brissago, an island about 1 km offshore in Lake Maggiore and now a botanical garden with many subtropical plants including palms. *Trachycarpus*, *Butia*, *Syagrus*, *Jubaea*, *Chamaerops*, *Sabal*, *Phoenix*, and *Brahea* are found distributed all over the island; *Trachycarpus fortunei* grows most prolifically, in parts forming almost impenetrable jungles smothering anything else. The island, with its buildings, parks, plants, beautiful walks, and surroundings, is one of the most romantic places I have ever encountered. I am very fortunate to have seen this speck of paradise many times during my lifetime. At a very early age it was my introduction to palms.

Brissago

The township of Brissago (197 m above sea level) is located on Lake Maggiore and has a road, snaking along the lake's edge, with houses stuck on an extremely steep mountainside. To reach these houses one needs not only considerable driving skill but also a local guide. Carl Schell lives in one almost inaccessible place about 80 m above the lake. He led our party to a parking place some 15 m above his house from where we descended into his house via a "telephone-cabin-sized" cable tram. At his house we met Dr. Walder and Dr. Meier, other Swiss members of the International Palm Society. Sitting there with these palm enthusiasts, looking over the palm tops into the distance with steep mountains rising out of the water, one could imagine very easily being in Tahiti or some other enchanted island in the lush Pacific. When I list the palms growing in Carl Schell's garden, I must remind the reader that we are talking about a place in Switzerland, a country which in most people's minds is associated with mountains, snow and eternal ice! The following palms are fully exposed, without winter protection.

Arenga engleri
Brahea armata

B. edulis
B. elegans
Butia capitata and two varieties
Ceroxylon interruptum
C. quinduense
Chamaedorea microspadix
C. radicalis
Chamaerops humilis
Jubaea chilensis
Livistona chinensis
Phoenix canariensis
P. dactylifera
P. theophrasti
Rhapis excelsa
R. humilis
Sabal mexicana
S. minor
S. palmetto
Trachycarpus fortunei
T. martianus
T. wagnerianus
Trithrinax acanthocoma
Washingtonia filifera
W. robusta

The following palms receive a degree of overhead protection in winter.

Archontophoenix cunninghamiana
Chamaedorea elegans
C. seifritzii
Howea forsteriana
Lytocaryum weddellianum
Phoenix roebelenii
Rhopalostylis baueri
R. cheesemannii

The winter of 1985/86 was severe with very low temperatures all over Europe. Dr. Meier had had a specimen of *Trachycarpus fortunei* growing for 25 years in his garden near Zurich, some 200 km further north; minus 30° C put a stop to that. The temperature in Carl Schell's garden reached a low of -8° C. A great many palms which had been growing for more than 120 years died that winter also on the French Riviera. The following palms did not survive that night:

Acoelorrhaphe wrightii
Caryota mitis
Ceroxylon utile
Livistona australis
Rhopalostylis sapida

It goes without saying that these gentlemen keep on trying to grow an ever increasing collection of exotic palms.

We also visited the estate of Dr. Walder in Valle Verzasca, a wild and craggy mountain valley leading north towards the Alps. The success story of his palm garden is perhaps not so much in its great variety but rather the steep back of the house which has turned into a self propagating, totally acclimatized jungle of *Trachycarpus fortunei*, with plants of all sizes from seedlings to fully grown 15 m palms.

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NATURAL HISTORY NOTE

Flowering in *Corypha*

An interesting phenomenon occurred in 1988 in the Miami area. To date, seven *Corypha* palms are known to have flowered. Although the individual flowers are not open at the time of this writing, the huge inflorescences are quite impressive.

The first to be noticed were two *Corypha umbraculifera*, the Talipot Palm, at the USDA Sub-tropic Research Station. The seeds of these imposing palms were collected at Atkins Garden, Cuba in 1952. The seedlings were planted at the Station during the following year.

In December 1987, a staff member at Fairchild Tropical Garden saw a newly developing flower spike of *Corypha taliera*. This smaller relative of the Talipot, *C. umbraculifera* is also a native of India. The seed of this palm was collected in 1956 in Rio Botanic Garden.

Soon afterward, we learned of additional *Corypha umbraculifera* displaying young inflorescences. Two of these plants are at

Conclusion

Palms in Europe are obviously not a new discovery. People have long grown and loved many more palms than the two native species, *Chamaerops humilis* and *Phoenix theophrasti*. I have seen palms in Roman mosaics and in a Byzantine church. However, in modern times they have been grown for their beauty and tropical image for at least 150 years in reasonable quantities all over the more temperate parts of Europe.

the University of Florida's Tropical Research and Education Campus. According to Dr. Carl Campbell, these were received as seedlings in 1930. The palms were planted in 1933. Another was discovered to be sending up a new inflorescence at the USDA Station. Its origin is not known. A seventh *Corypha umbraculifera* is in a private residence in Coral Gables near Fairchild Tropical Garden. The origin of this palm is also unclear.

Botanists and palm enthusiasts agree that a certain level of maturity must be reached by a *Corypha* before it has the potential to flower. The time required by an individual is determined by its environmental conditions. Once maturity is attained, climatic conditions must trigger the flowering process. While these factors may not be under the control of man, it would be of great interest to know the cause of this spectacular event.

For more information about *Corypha umbraculifera*, please refer to *Principes* 19(3), 1975, pp. 83-99 and *Principes* 31(2), 1987, pp. 68-77.

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