

Chamaedorea minima

BILL GUNTHER

740 Crest Road, Del Mar, CA 92014

The April 1991 issue of *Principes* has arrived, and it was a real pleasure to receive it. It was a pleasure because in that issue, finally, Bob Wilson's "dwarf pumila" *Chamaedorea* palm has been recognized as a new species and named *Chamaedorea minima*, by Don Hodel. Bob Wilson was the founder of the Las Cruces Botanical Garden, in south Costa Rica (that garden now is called the Jardín Botánico Roberto y Catherine Wilson). Don Hodel is a southern California botanist who is the author of the new book *Chamaedorea Palms; the Species and their Cultivation*, soon to be published by the International Palm Society. This article is to tell the interesting story of how Bob Wilson obtained *Chamaedorea minima*. This information has never before been published; it should be on record now before it goes to its grave with me, the last living person who got the story directly from Bob Wilson.

The story follows:

In the 1960s, Bob Wilson was busy developing Las Cruces Botanical Garden; he had a staff of "Ticos" (slang for Costa Ricans) working for him, at minimum wages. One of his Ticos brought in a friend and introduced him to Bob Wilson; we will call the friend José. José was very bright and intelligent, so Bob offered him a job as an additional member of his staff. José declined the offer—but alternatively he showed Bob a specimen of a *Chamaedorea* which Bob had never before seen, and offered to provide duplicates of it in exchange for Costa Rican currency amounting to about 75 cents in U.S. money, per plant. Also he said that "later"

he would reveal to Bob Wilson exactly where the plant grew in the wild.

Bob and José shook hands on that arrangement and during the next few months José prospered well from that arrangement. Too well—because inventories showed that the Las Cruces collection of this new palm was growing at about one quarter of the rate José was being paid. Obviously, José was busy at night, digging up palms from Las Cruces for which he already had been paid, then reselling them again the next day to Bob Wilson. (Yes, some Ticos are just as clever, and just as crooked, as are some Gringos.)

At this stage, Bob Wilson was furious. So what he did was to mark the tools in his toolhouse at closing time, to determine whether or not they were used during the night. The next morning, when he checked, he found that many of the marked tools not only apparently had been used—they were also missing. Not only were the palms being stolen, the tools to steal them were also being stolen.

Bob was doubly furious. And when José came in that day with more palms to sell, Bob confronted him with the evidence. To that confrontation, José simply smiled, and said to Bob Wilson that neither Bob nor any other botanist would ever locate the native habitat of what now has been described as *Chamaedorea minima*. And he then walked out.

Around 1987, Paul Mahalik (then Chairman of the San Diego and Imperial Counties Section of the International Palm Society) and I visited Las Cruces botanical Garden, where Bob Wilson, still somewhat bitter over his continued failure to locate

the native home of the palm, loaned us his jeep and driver and one of his Tico workers, and asked us to search for the palm in a designated area. For two days we searched, but our search was unsuccessful. By then, Bob Wilson was already too unsteady to accompany us.

Soon thereafter, partly for imagining that José still was stealing specimens of the palm, and partly because of a disagreement with the Organization for Tropical Studies (which by then owned the garden) Bob Wilson secretly dug up all the little *Chamaedoreas* which he could find in Las Cruces, and transplanted them into a nearby canyon, which he still owned. (For *Chamaedorea minima*, this was not a big problem; I have not seen it over six inches tall, but Don Hodel in his description generously indicates that it sometimes grows

to twice that height. But even if it does, it is still not much of a "tree.")

Both Bob Wilson and Paul Mahalik have since died. Luis Gomez, now Director of the Wilson Garden, assures us that all the small *chamaedoreas* which Bob transplanted have been returned to the garden. José has not been seen since his confrontation with Bob Wilson. And the native habitat of *Chamaedorea minima* remains unknown.

None of the above is "essential horticultural information"; it is just irrelevant gossip—but it is all true. And for knowing it, very surely *Chamaedorea minima* will become far more desirable a palm for your garden than otherwise.

So try your best to get it.

But don't steal it!

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Scott Zona Wins Award for *Sabal* Study

The 1991 Jesse M. Greenman Award has been won by Scott Zona for his publication "A monograph of *Sabal* (Arecaceae: Coryphoideae)," published in *Aliso* 12: 583-666. 1990. This monographic study is part of a doctoral dissertation from the Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California, under the direction of Sherwin Carlquist.

The Greenman Award, a certificate and a cash prize of \$500, is presented each year by the Missouri Botanical Garden. It recognizes the paper judged best in vascular plant or bryophyte systematics based on a doctoral dissertation published during the previous year.