

Principes, 38(3), 1994, pp. 153-156.

The Chamaedorea Research Collection in Los Angeles

DONALD R. HODEL

University of California, 2615 S. Grand Ave., Suite 400, Los Angeles, CA 90007 USA

During the course of my research for the recently published book *Chamaedorea Palms*, I made over 600 collections of *Chamaedorea* throughout Latin America and from cultivation. These were dried and labeled, and the original set deposited in the Bailey Hortorium at Cornell University and duplicates in the appropriate institution of the country of origin. In most cases, flowers, fruits, and pinnae of each of the collections were preserved in FAA and are at the Bailey Hortorium for use in future anatomical studies.

In some instances, I returned with living material for which flowers and fruits were not observed in the wild for establishment in the research greenhouses here in Los Angeles. This cultivated material enabled me to obtain flowers and fruits, heretofore unknown, for many named and unnamed taxa. Observing, collecting, and studying flowers of cultivated plants from documented, wild localities has added immeasurably to our knowledge of *Chamaedorea*.

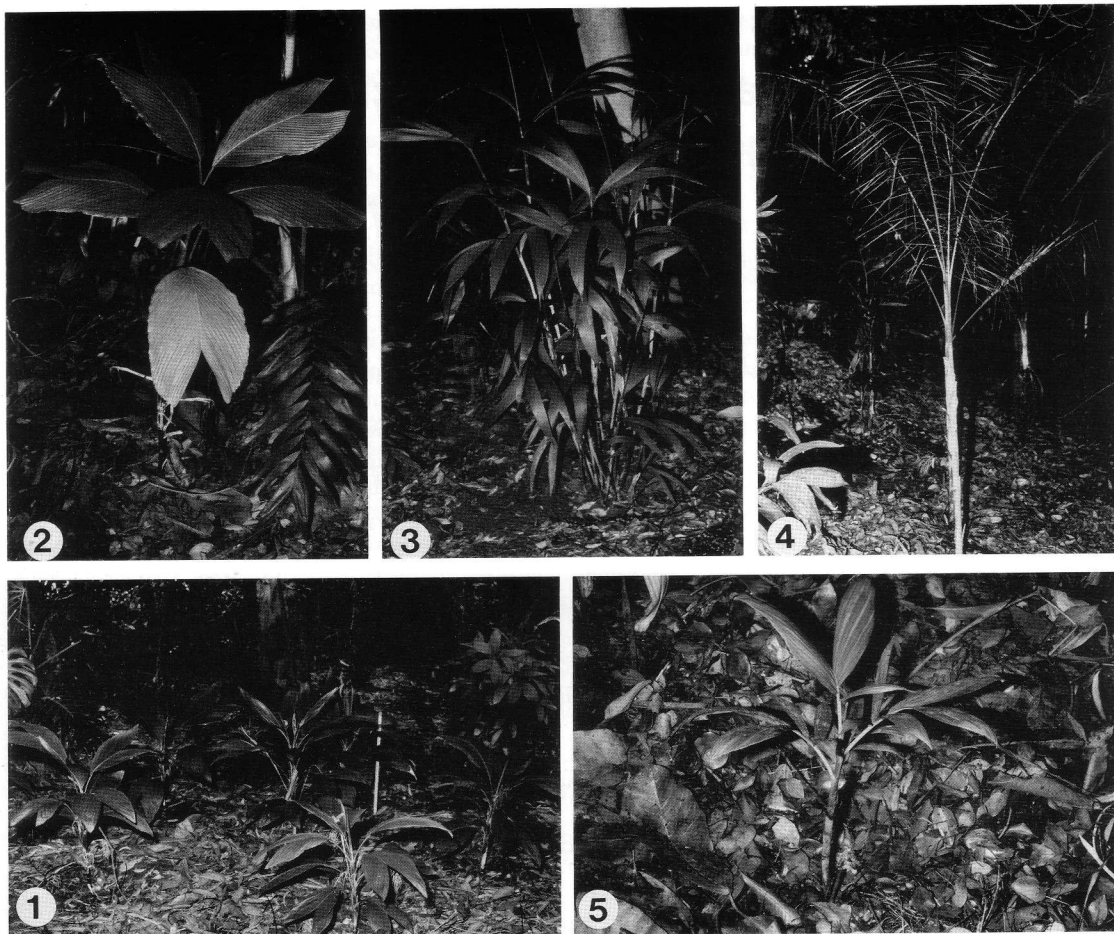
As the plants grew and developed and they were no longer needed for floral studies, I began to search for an appropriate facility where they could be planted out, their cultural requirements evaluated, and their potential for introduction to cultivation assessed. The planted-out material could also serve as mother blocks for seed production for interested collectors, hobbyists, nurserymen, and, even in a few cases perhaps, reintroduction into the wild.

After careful evaluation, I selected the Virginia Robinson Gardens as the site at which to plant out the *Chamaedorea* research collection. Located in Beverly Hills, the Gardens is a satellite facility of the more well known Los Angeles State and County Arboretum headquartered in Arcadia. The Gardens has several advantages as the repository of the *Chamaedorea* collection. Foremost among its outstanding attributes are its location on a south-facing, frost-free slope a few miles from the Pacific Ocean, a situation providing adequate heat

for growth yet is free of cold, damaging temperatures. Being in a permanent institution ensures that the collection will not be subjected to the uncertainties which often plague collections in the hands of individuals. A public facility, the Gardens is staffed by able and dedicated personnel who have shown a great interest in caring for the collection in a professional manner. As an old garden, there were existing trees that provided a well developed canopy under which the *chamaedoreas* were planted. The Gardens is relatively secure since it is in a residential neighborhood and is open to visitors by appointment only. Its proximity to Los Angeles enables me to visit it frequently. Finally, the Gardens seem financially secure since it has an endowment to supplement its public funds.

The Virginia Robinson Gardens had its beginning in 1911 when Mrs. Virginia Robinson, heiress to the Robinson Department Store fortune, built her home and began to plant her garden on six hillside acres west of Los Angeles. The Robinson estate would eventually become the first one in Beverly Hills. An avid gardener, Mrs. Robinson directed the layout and building of numerous terraces, interlocking footpaths, brick staircases, pools, and watercourses on her hillside lot. She obtained a wide variety of seeds and plants from various local nurseries and from as far away as Florida. Over the years she developed her estate into one of the premiere gardens in the greater Los Angeles area. Known as one of the most vivacious and popular hostesses in the city, Mrs. Robinson lived and entertained in a grand style, hosting an assortment of prominent and amusing visitors from statesmen to movie stars at her frequent and fashionable parties.

In her later years, Mrs. Robinson recognized the importance of ensuring that her beloved estate remain intact for the future benefit and enjoyment of the people of Los Angeles. Although Mrs. Robinson died in 1977 just a few weeks before her

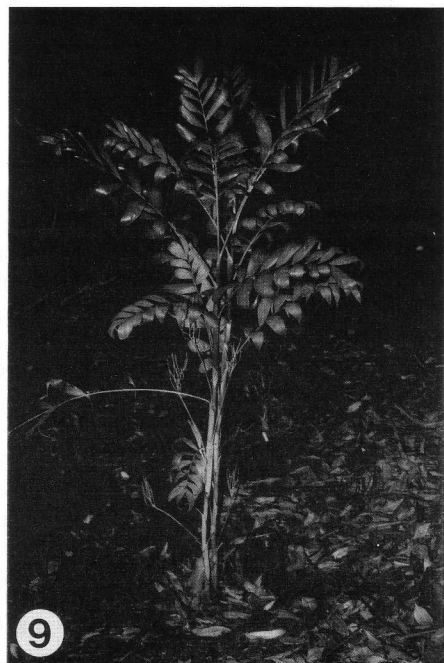
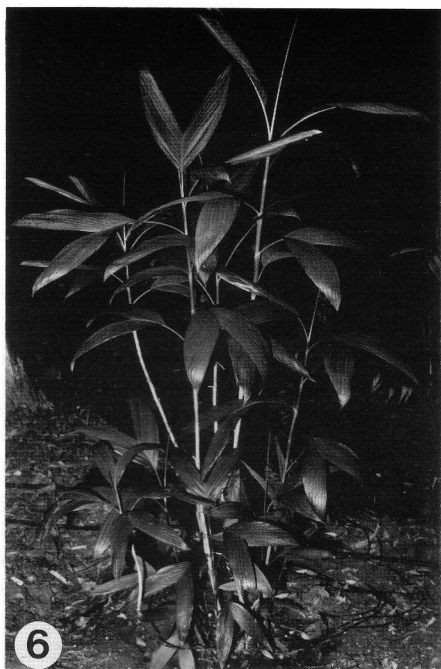


1. A group planting of *Chamaedorea ernesti-augustii* is typical of the manner in which the plants have been arranged in the collection at the Gardens. 2. *Chamaedorea amabilis* with bifid leaves and from Panama grows next to *C. pochutlensis* with pinnate leaves from Mexico. 3. *Chamaedorea fragrans* forms an attractive clump of stems with bifid leaves. 4. With finely pinnate leaves, *Chamaedorea glaucifolia* is an interesting study in texture. 5. The dwarf *Chamaedorea guntheriana* from Panama looks right at home in the Gardens.

100th birthday, she had in 1974 bequeathed her estate along with a handsome endowment to the County of Los Angeles to be used as a botanical garden or arboretum. The Los Angeles County Department of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens has administered the Gardens since 1977. Among the outstanding plants at the Gardens are the largest grove of king palms, *Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*, outside of Australia; an exceptional *Ficus* with numerous aerial roots dropping over 40 feet to the ground; and the largest Mexican hand flower tree, *Chiranthodendron pentadactylon*, in the United States.

The first increment of 39 plants representing nine species of *Chamaedorea* was planted out at

the Robinson Botanic Gardens in 1988. Subsequent plantings in 1989, 1990, 1991, and 1992 have brought the number of established plants to nearly 300 with 46 species represented as of 1992. Future plantings are planned and will add to the number of plants and species in the collection. One of the objectives in planting out the palms was to place as many plants as possible of a particular collection together in a group to make hand pollination easier and lessen the chances of cross pollination between species and even among different collections of the same species (Fig. 1). All plants are labeled and mapped and, although most have flowered, only a few produce fruits regularly at this relatively young age.



6. This form of *Chamaedorea nubium* from cloud forests on the Pacific coast of Oaxaca, Mexico has grown remarkably well. Note irrigation tubing around base of plant. 7. The dwarf *Chamaedorea pumila* has a leafy crown. Note staminate inflorescence. 8. This *Chamaedorea robertii* with bifid leaves has spicate inflorescences emerging from the base. 9. These two flowering plants of *Chamaedorea whitelockiana* have handsome crowns of leaves.

The following species in *Chamaedorea* are now successfully established in the collection.

C. allenii
C. alternans
C. amabilis (Fig. 2)
C. arenbergiana
C. brachyclada
C. brachypoda
C. cataractarum

C. costaricana
C. deckeriana
C. elegans
C. elatior
C. ernesti-augustii (Fig. 1)
C. foveata
C. fragrans (Fig. 3)
C. geonomiformis
C. glaucifolia (Fig. 4)
C. graminifolia

C. guntheriana (Fig. 5)
C. hooperiana
C. klotzschiana
C. macrospadix
C. metallica
C. microspadix
C. neurochlamys
C. nubium (Fig. 6)
C. oblongata
C. oreophila
C. pittieri
C. pinnatifrons
C. pochutlensis
C. pumila (Fig. 7)
C. quezalteca
C. radicalis
C. robertii (Fig. 8)
C. sartorii
C. scheryi
C. seifrizii
C. serpens
C. stolonifera
C. sullivaniorum
C. tenella
C. tepejilote
C. tuerckheimii

C. warscewiczii
C. whitelockiana (Fig. 9)
C. woodsoniana

The *Chamaedorea* collection is situated on a southwest to west-facing slope under the natural canopy provided by some of Mrs. Robinson's original trees, including *Pittosporum*, *Ficus*, and several *Eucalyptus* among others. These canopy trees supply a steady stream of fallen leaves that is permitted to collect on the ground and develop into a natural leaf litter around the palms, lending an ambiance to the collection not too dissimilar from that found in the wild. A drip irrigation system was installed to supply water and now its pipes and tubes are mostly obscured by the leaf litter. There are a few crude and rather rough paths through the collection and it is hoped that these can be improved and perhaps even paved in the future, enabling visitors to view the palms safely and more easily. Although visitors are encouraged, the Virginia Robinson Gardens is open by appointment only and those wishing to view the Gardens and its collections must make advance reservations.

CLASSIFIED

USED PALM AND CYCAD PUBLICATIONS: SEARCH SERVICE, BUY, SELL. Send list of items you wish to buy or sell; request list of titles in stock. D. Johnson, 605 Ray Drive, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Tel. (301)587-2840.

PALM POSTERS. Full color, several designs showing palms in habitat, \$US16 to \$25 postpaid, discount for 2 or more. Sizes approx 50×70 cm (20×28"). Air shipped in mailing tube. FREE leaflet, write WUSCHKE, 49 HAVERSHAM, WHEELERS HILL VIC, AUSTRALIA 3150.