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Jardin Botanico de Caracas: A Tour by August Braun

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I arrived in Caracas late in the afternoon of June 12, a day or two behind most members attending the 1994 I.P.S. Biennial in Venezuela. Tardy by a preceding trip through the Caribbean to look at endemic palms, I immediately wondered what I had missed in arriving behind others. No one else on my plane seemed to be a palm person, so I made my way solo through the minor maze of entry inspections and, on reaching the lobby, was immediately greeted by I.P.S. hosts in the terminal. After a brief stop with my new Spanish-speaking friends at a local restaurant to have a "comida tipico", we headed over a huge range of steep mountains. I had heard that the one hour's drive from the airport was dramatic with the change in climate and scenery. Like a kid on his first trip from home, I peered out the windows looking for excitement, especially palms. As we entered the downtown area of Caracas I was struck by two things. First, Caracas is a beautiful city with more "high-rise buildings" than I had ever seen in one place. Second, before I could ask what it was, my host proudly said "and there's the Botanical Garden of Caracas". Right next to the freeway was a huge collection of towering palms!

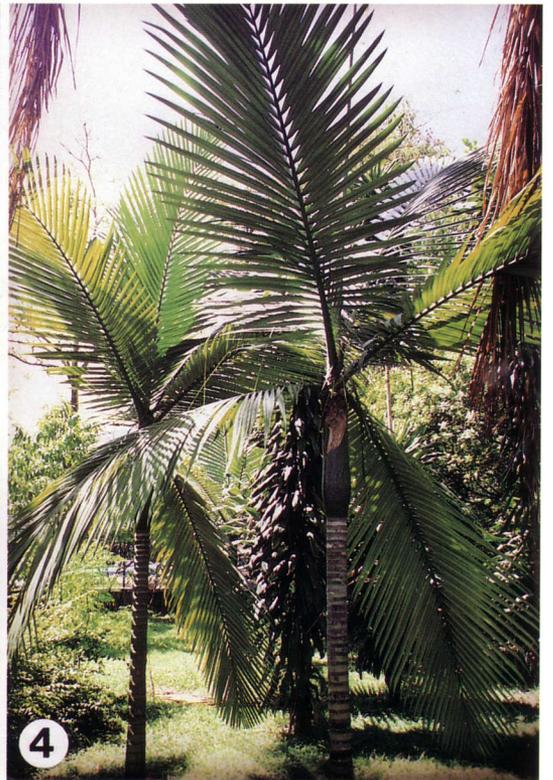
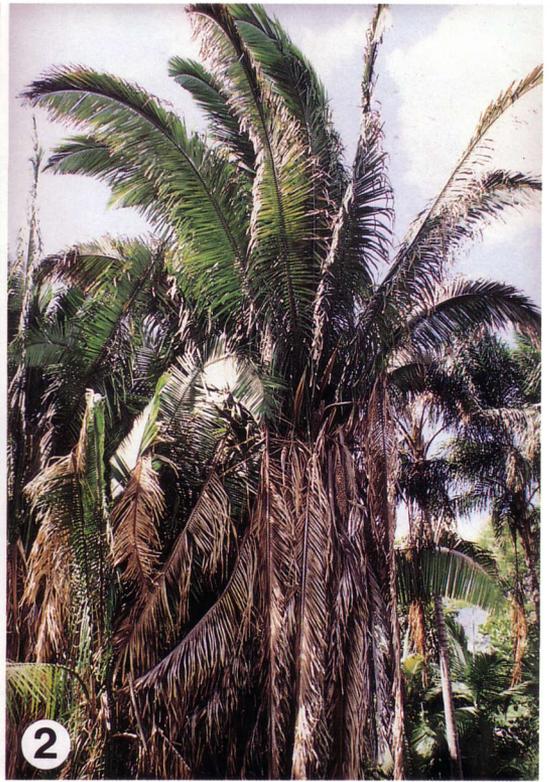
I've always told my friends that "a real vacation means that you go somewhere warmer than you are now". Of course, that translates into "you go somewhere where there are more palms than you have in your area". A corollary to this is that you figure out the best way to see the most palms in a limited time. This philosophy began in the early 1970's when I first began to appreciate that botanical gardens are one of the best ways to see magnificently grown palms. When in a foreign country, I always remember to visit the old parts of town, the old churches and established universities to see their plantings. But I never forget to visit botanical gardens. So, here in Caracas, the Jardin Botanico De Caracas would be a highlight.

We were told that an "early bird bus" would be leaving promptly at 7:00 A.M., Tuesday, to

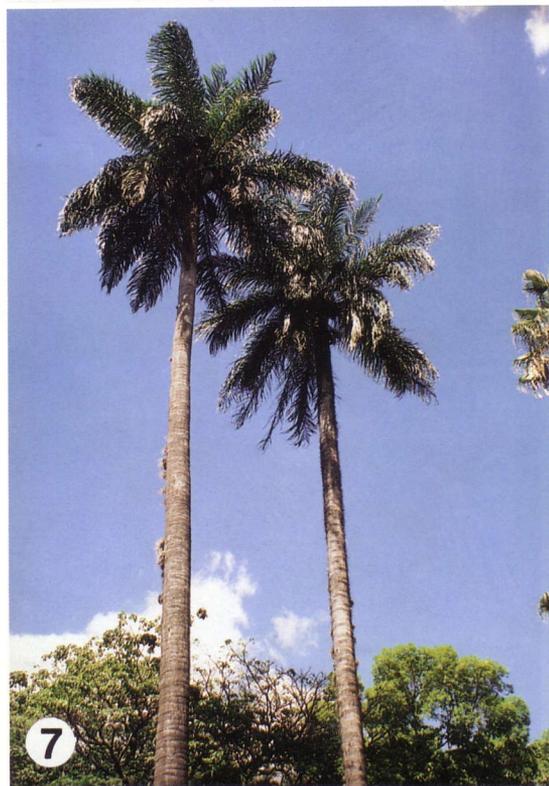
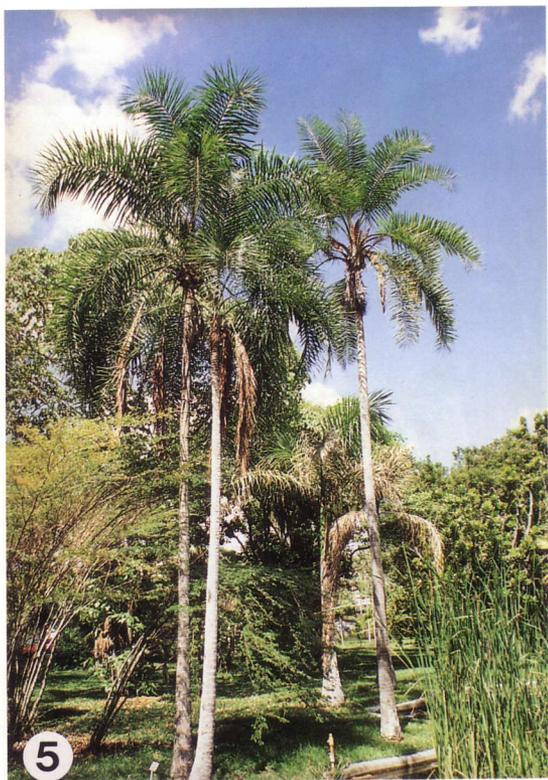
visit the Botanical Garden. I figured very few people would be as eccentric as I, so before dawn I struggled out of bed, threw on my clothes and grabbed a cup of coffee before jumping on the bus. There weren't too many of us on that first bus, but all the people of Caracas seemed to be heading straight for the Garden. As we zigged back and forth through narrow streets, our driver told us that these were the students from the University going to their first class just beyond the Garden. I was relieved, as we were the first ones allowed through the gates on a special early morning opening for the Palm Society. There in front of us on a beautiful 160 acres were over 250 species of palms!

As I readied my camera, I began wondering when we would see the famous August Braun. I had heard of him but a lot of my information about Mr. Braun was from brief notations about the author in any of his ten books on palms, or from stories given me by Jim Cain who has been fortunate enough to know him for almost two decades (Fig. 1). Mr. Braun began his work at the Garden in 1952 and specialized in adding new palms to the collection. The garden actually was founded in 1944, but it was not until August started obtaining new species from around the world that it attained its reputation as one of the best palm collections in the world. It presently displays 89 different genera of palms.

This particular morning was somewhat damp with a light rain. I knew my first few rolls of film would become famous for their dreary backgrounds. Trying to save my camera for better sun, a few of us teamed up together for a quick first pass through the garden. I was amazed at the size and stature of many of the specimens. With wet tennis shoes, we made our way back to the Garden's auditorium for the scheduled speakers on palms. I wondered if I was the only one barefoot in the auditorium. Trying to dry out my shoes and socks in an inconspicuous place, I noticed a sea-



1. August Braun, left; Jim Cain, President of the IPS, right. 2. *Scheelea macrocarpa*. 3. *Corypha umbraculifera*. 4. *Kentiopsis oliviformis*.



5. *Syagrus orinocensis*. 6. *Copernicia macroglossa*. 7. *Acrocomia aculeata*. 8. *Sabal umbraculifera*.



9



10



11



12

9. *Roystonea venezuelana*. 10. *Borassus flabellifer*. 11. *Raphia hookeri*. 12. *Raphia hookeri*, trunk detail.



13. Left to right: Henk Beentje, Dr. Natalie Uhl, Dr. John Dransfield, in front of two different forms of *Chamaerops humilis*. 14. August Braun pointing to crown of *Burretiokentia vieillardii*.

soned man walking among the crowd with an air of understanding about him. Others were biding for his time. This man must be the creative force behind the Garden. This was August Braun.

Having promised our Editor, Natalie Uhl, that I would write an article on the Garden, I promptly introduced myself. Flanked by two volunteer translators from Avepalmas, I asked August if he would tour us through the Garden with comments on some species. He gave his approval with a modest smile and off we went. Not only did we view palms, but each palm came with a story. With his crystal-sharp memory, he could typically remember when he obtained the seed on a given plant and who gave him the seed. With his forty-three years experience at the Garden, he explained how the Caracas "eternal spring" weather gave average high temperatures of 33 Centigrade, lows of 10 Centigrade and ideal growing conditions. The garden "is at 900 meters elevation and has fifteen different areas of planting".

Mr. Braun explained how 30 years ago he was

given seeds of *Scheelea macrocarpa* (Fig. 2) and presently the garden hosts a near mature plant. "This Venezuelan palm is economically important because of its oil". The *Corypha umbraculifera* (Fig. 3) is 35 years old and needs 60 years to flower". Loving New Caledonian species, I inquisitively asked the age of the stand of *Kentiopsis oliviformis* (Fig. 4). "Twelve years old" he responded. The *Syagrus orinocensis* (Fig. 5) is from the Orinoco River area of Venezuela and Columbia" and "the *Copernicia macroglossa* (Fig. 6) seed came from Cuba 35 years ago". August raised all of these palms from seeds he obtained around the world. "Fortunately I had friends in Miami who helped me get seeds". His favorite *Copernicia* is *Copernicia tectorum* from Venezuela. "To see this species you have to go to the plains area of Venezuela". In the Garden we have only *Copernicia* from Cuba.

"*Acrocomia aculeata* (Fig. 7) is from the mountains in Venezuela. One can make wine from the seeds but they are also an aphrodisiac for

women". Then he smiled at me and said "in Venezuela women are fertile without the benefits of this palm". "It is a favorite *Acrocomia* and the trunks reach up to 18 meters tall". He then explained how *Sabal* (Fig. 8) species provide lumber for construction. "My favorite palm is the *Roystonea venezuelana*" (Fig. 9). "It's one of the best palms in the world and comes from Venezuela and Ecuador". He then opened up his arms to the two long rows of forty-four year old *R. venezuelanas* that lined the main entrance into the Garden. Pointing out a large *Borassus flabellifer* (Fig. 10) near by, he described how "a member of the Society and an aviator, Harry Gibson, donated one seed from Indonesia 25 years ago."

One of my favorite palms from my morning outing was the *Raphia hookeri* (Fig. 11). I had never before seen such a different palm. A large, suckering pinnate palm with a most unusual trunk, it appeared as if someone had attached thousands of epiphytic bromeliads to the trunk (Fig. 12). Directing Mr. Braun's attention to this curious palm, he explained how *Raphia hookeri* is from Central Africa. "Our specimen is thirteen years old and began to sucker eight years after planting". This palm is in sharp contrast to the *Raphia australis* with its orange petioles. He also pointed out multiple forms of *Chamaerops humilis* (Fig. 13) and the beautiful crown on *Burretio kentia vieillardii* (Fig. 14). "The *Hyospathe pittieri* (Fig. 15) is only found in the Henri Pittier National Park in Venezuela". The tour continued as we talked about characteristics of hundreds of palms.

Having spent several hours viewing the garden and en route to a beautiful dinner that Avepalmas had waiting for us, I decided to sneak in two more questions. I asked first if there were any more palms that he wanted to see planted in the Garden. He quickly responded "Yes, more native species



15. *Hyospathe pittieri*.

from Venezuela. Then young people can learn to take care of them." "And finally, Mr. Braun, where do the best palms in the world come from?" Despite criticism of my question from another member of our Society, I put on my interviewer's hat and pushed forward for an answer. He turned, looked directly at me and in a most diplomatic fashion said "Venezuela does have nice palms . . . and other countries do as well". Smiling, I knew he was right. Our many thanks for a tour by August Braun.

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