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Lucita Hardie Wait

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April 19, 1995, sitting by the pool in my garden in Miami, listening to my chattering lories, I realize that Lucita Wait would have been 92 today. Her *Ptychosperma waitianum* survived Hurricane Andrew and has an emergent new red leaf that is gorgeous. I know that I must get this article done for our editors, Natalie Uhl and John Dransfield, and also realize it is one of the most difficult tasks that I have ever attempted.

Lucita Wait's love of palms came from her Brazilian childhood. Her father was a Presbyterian minister in Brazil and her mother's family was part of the movement of southerners, who, loving plantation style living, left the United States for Brazil after the Civil War. She came to the United States to attend college in the 1920s. Her southern English was influenced heavily by Portuguese. I will never forget the Sunday morning when I arrived to help with the Palm Society Seed Bank and heard her speaking Portuguese to her friend, Roberto Burle Marx, the world famous Brazilian landscape architect.

I first came to Lucita's door in January 1969 as a graduate student, a Longwood Fellow at the University of Delaware's Longwood Garden graduate program in ornamental horticulture and botanical garden management. Since I wanted to work on the palms horticulturally, Hal Moore of the Bailey Hortorium, who served as a special advisor on my Master's thesis program, suggested a taxonomic study at the subfamily level on the palm seed proteins. He told me to go to Miami and see Lucita Wait, the seed lady. Miami in 1969 was spectacular, especially in January in comparison to icy and snowy Philadelphia. The skies were clear and blue and the streets were lined with thousands of coconuts. Arriving there was like landing in paradise. When Lucita answered the door at her home in South Miami where she had lived for nearly 30 years, she was visible through the screen, a thick-set woman with lovely white hair and a floral print dress, somewhat reserved but friendly (Fig. 1). She gave me seeds of several palms and suggested several places to

obtain more, including Fairchild Tropical Garden. She arranged for my stay at the Kampong, David Fairchild's summer residence in Coconut Grove and introduced me to Kay Sweeney, whose dedicated efforts preserved the Kampong. These experiences were living a part of Miami's history. I returned to the frozen north and finished my work and then moved in June 1970 to attend the University of Miami and was employed as a lab technician at Fairchild Tropical Garden. Through Lucita's help and extensive correspondence, palm seed continued to come my way, so naturally Sunday mornings became a time of seed bank work and breakfast with Lucita.

I still see Miami through Lucita's eyes, not a bustling crowded community but a lovely paradise of dooryard gardens of Cabada palms, flowering poincianas, and jaboticabas.

Lucita chuckled when the lovely *Ptychosperma* from New Guinea, described by Fred Essig, was named after her. Although she loved the thin-stemmed understory gem *Ptychosperma waitianum* (Fig. 2), she was proud of her stoutness and thought that perhaps a much thicker trunked palm would have been more appropriate.

Her Stories

Lucita was a storyteller. She loved to entertain with stories and she had many. Fortunately for me, she entered my life at a very pivotal time—the beginning of my career in south Florida as an extension agent. Lucita introduced me to Dade County and to south Florida. I saw the beauty of the dooryard gardens described by David Fairchild. She showed me the flowering poincianas blooming in June, the jaboticaba introduced and grown by her mother, and the lovely palms from which she collected seeds.

During our Sunday mornings together, we visited some of Miami's greatest past. Stories abounded about Dent Smith, David Fairchild, Colonel Robert Montgomery, Liberty Hyde Bailey, and Arthur and Wumpsie Langlois. They all came to life through Lucita. Scientists and horticulturists



1. Lucita Wait

from around the world appeared at her door seeking seeds. Professor Anthony Davis visited from Calcutta, Alfred Razafindratsira came from Tananarive, and we begged him for seeds from Madagascar. Roberto Burle Marx was a frequent visitor.

I remember in particular one story about Dent Smith who founded the Palm Society, approaching Lucita one day in the mid 1950s at Fairchild Tropical Garden, he said "Lucita, we have societies for all sorts of plants, we need one for palms." Lucita Wait thus became the third member of the Palm Society. Nell Montgomery became the fourth. Lucita's favorite story about Dent Smith concerned his magical salesmanship. He had the proverbial gift of gab and could sell anything. According to Lucita, his first foray into selling was during the Great Depression when he was hired to sell life insurance. As he left his new employer's building he sold a policy to the elevator man, the janitor, and the doorman—three policies sold within 15 minutes of employment. Lucita admired Dent's ability in forming and promoting the Palm Society. She also told the story about Colonel Montgomery, founder of Fairchild Tropical Garden and their book about the first 10 years of the Garden. Nixon Smiley, a past Director of the Garden and Miami Herald Garden Editor, often appeared in her conversations, which covered a Who's Who of Dade County. Our Sunday morning forays many times included visits to Nell Montgomery Jennings to collect seeds, to the Von Paulsen's Orchid Nursery in the Redland in south Dade County, to Marge Corbin or Isabelle Krome (founder of the Mary Krome's Bird Sanctuary in the Redland). Lucita knew the location of every fruiting palm tree in Miami and when to collect the seed. Her favorite Nell Montgomery Jennings story was of Nell's search for the largest *Washingtonia* in the state to present to her husband as a birthday present. It took yards and yards of red ribbon to decorate it!

Lucita also loved to listen. I shared with Lucita my own stories coming from the prairie state, of my relatives going to school with Abraham Lincoln at New Salem and other stories concerning our fifth generation family farms. I told her how startling it was to discover that during the last glacial age, according to a favorite geology professor at the University of Illinois, a glacier descended down the state leaving its terminal moraine on my Uncle Albert's farm, creating some of the best "bottom land" for farming in the state.

Perhaps Lucita's favorite story was of our trip to the extraordinary Seychelles, the land of the double coconut, *Lodoicea maldivica*. In April 1985, the Royal Horticulture Society advertised a tour of the Seychelles led by John Dransfield. The trip was a must for palm-ophiles and the trip was magic. It was fall in the southern hemisphere and all the Seychelles palms were in fruit. We enjoyed the Vallée de Mai, walking under the forest giants, especially with John Dransfield and his wife telling the story of the magnificent double coconut. I spent three days arranging for the permits to ship 34 viable seed and was able to handpick each seed. Lucita was enthralled not only to see the palms, but to find that seed was available. The foresters, while scouring the forest for the seed, found five just starting to germinate and, of course, offered them to me. Aware of the delicate nature of the coco-de-mer's borassoid palm root, I knew that these five would have to be carefully packed and hand-carried. As leader of the tour, John Dransfield was aghast, afraid that members of the group would be asked to assist me carrying these enormous 50 pound giants onto the plane. Lucita heard his comments and just winked at me and said "Don't worry, De, we will handle it when we get to the airport." At the airport in Mahé, she ordered a wheelchair, promptly sat down in it, and loaded the sides of the chair and her lap with double coconuts. She winked at me again and said "Age has its privileges." I never heard another comment from John during the 14 hour flight back to London. Lucita's fondest memories from this trip also included the sunset of Bird Island in which she viewed thousands of fairy terns seen with South Florida Palm Society members Libby Besse and David Hertzberg.

One of my favorite Lucita stories was her "birding" expedition to the Galapagos Islands where, during a boating mishap, she and her friend Ruth Shatz were lost overboard and bobbed in the water for nearly three hours before they were rescued. She said her thoughts were pleasant "Won't it be nice, my nieces and nephews will talk about their Aunt Lucita who was lost in the Galapagos." Needless to say, both women survived but at the time I knew that Lucita had recognized her own mortality and had accepted it with grace and dignity.

The Palm Society Seed Bank

Lucita Wait took charge of the Palm Society seed bank from Nat DeLeon in the early 1960s

and for the next 20 years, she was the source of seeds for most of the palms available to Palm Society members and botanical gardens around the world. Palm seeds were distributed to members in South Africa, Thailand, Japan, Central and South America, Australia, and the United States. Due to David Fairchild's and Colonel Robert Montgomery's efforts, Miami had become one of the "palmiest" cities of the world. Lucita distributed the treasures that the two men introduced.

Lethal Yellowing

In July 1971, a serious disease called Lethal Yellowing was found to be killing over 50 coconut palms in a Coral Gables neighborhood. This was the beginning of a terrible plague that has killed over five million palms in south Florida. Lucita realized from the beginning the need for many new palms and greater diversity in germ plasm. She served on advisory committees and her background work resulted in funding for a research program. The Seed Bank hummed as the Society stepped up its efforts to obtain more palms from around the world. Madame Ganna Walska chided us, but nevertheless, sent \$10,000.00 to the Seed Bank to honor her beloved California nurseryman, Otto Martens. Lucita was especially pleased to help sponsor numerous scientists in their field work, the late Harold E. Moore, Jr., above all. Hal Moore, who originally considered Lucita just another garden club lady, sent seeds from New Caledonia; John Dransfield sent seeds from Asia. Several hundred seed accessions were shipped out during these heady times.

Palm Beach County Chapter

Lucita helped with the inaugural meeting of the Palm Beach County Chapter of the Palm Society in 1972, drawing over 300 members from the Palm Beach area. She was excited about seeing so many new members and the lovely palms for which the area is named. She and Ruth Shatz, during their travels, always brought along a roster of Palm Society members so that they could visit the proud members' "children," meaning the palms, of course.

Freeze of 1977

On January 20, 1977, the day on which President Carter was inaugurated, snow fell in Miami.

For four consecutive nights, temperatures ranged from near freezing to the mid-20s. It was a tremendous jolt to see all the "fried" landscapes and rotting vegetation. Lucita helped deal with the shock. She said "it will all come back; always has." And it did. She said that Liberty Hyde Bailey's advice after visiting south Florida during a similar freeze in the 1940s was to "Wait, Watch and Water." It worked in 1977, as a good portion of the plant material did grow back after we recommended pruning once the resprouting had occurred.

Hurricane Andrew

In the early morning hours of Monday, August 24, 1992, a devastating category four hurricane visited south Florida with 160 mile per hour winds cutting a swath through south Dade, from Killian Drive south some 20 miles through Homestead and Florida City. Over 50,000 homes were badly damaged or destroyed and 803 nurseries were flattened and mangled. My home along Killian Drive was heavily damaged, and the palm garden was destroyed with nearly 500 palms twisted, torqued, and snapped. Lucita's advice buoyed my spirits again. She arrived with her brother-in-law, Bill Smith, carrying food for my parrots, and helped me survey the damage. Having experienced numerous storms, she predicted that the landscape would come back. Once more, she was right; it has.

It is now September 26, 1995, and the family farm is gone as my father, nearing 80, has retired. The occasion is the Broward Palm Society Show at Flamingo Gardens, a site featuring lovely century old oaks, palms, and peacocks. It is hot and sticky but thousands of palms, of perhaps 400 species, were available at incredibly reasonable prices. Long-time member, Gertrude Cole, is there looking as spry as ever. Of course, Teddie Buhler and Phyllis Sneed came seeking goodies for their gardens. I expect Lucita to arrive any moment as this show is her heritage. I am shocked to realize how few of the new members know of Lucita and how important it is to make her seem alive again through memories of this extraordinary woman.

So how do I tell all of the stories of her grace, dignity, and serenity; the stories of simple pleasure with palms and birds; the story of the Lucita palm; the story of her 90th birthday (Fig. 3), her sister Helen and brother-in-law Bill's house shared with Lucita, a warm family home filled with flowers



2. *Ptychosperma waitianum* photographed in the wild by Ken Foster. 3. DeArmand Hull and Lucita celebrating her 90th birthday.



and 150 cards from Palm Society members from around the world; and the story of Lucita Hardie Wait Day proclaimed by the Mayor of Miami on May 13, 1993. I last saw Lucita at our regular Sunday morning breakfast in early July, 1993. She was excited about visiting her brother, Charles, in Montreat, North Carolina. She left the next week and enjoyed a week with him before suffering a series of debilitating strokes. Her memorial service was held in Miami's First Presbyterian Church on March 22, 1995. Her ashes were scattered among the grove of *Ptychosperma waitianum* at Fairchild Tropical Garden by her loving family of nieces and nephews, sister and brother. Her last

wish was to spend eternity among the palms at David Fairchild's and Colonel Montgomery's Fairchild Tropical Garden.

It is still possible to see Miami through Lucita's eyes, a paradise, a lovely community of dooryard palms and flowering poincianas. Lucita's generosity and public service can best be described by the famous story of San Michelle where Axel Munthe says "what you keep yourself, you lose; what you give away, you keep forever." Her legacy is the thousands of dooryard palms that grow around the world. She made the world her garden. I shall miss Lucita Hardie Wait for as long as I shall live.

Memories of Lucita Wait and Mel Sneed

Lucita Wait was one of my first contacts within the Palm Society. She had a very strong influence on me and my early love of palms. I joined the IPS about 1970, while Lucita was managing the Seed Bank for the Palm Society. I was a new member from Texas with only a very limited number of species available locally. I remember that she was very courteous and helpful to this Palm Society neophyte and got me enthusiastic about growing palms from seeds (which she generally supplied). Lucita had served Fairchild Tropical Garden as Librarian and Curator of the Fairchild Library and Palm Products Museum during the early years of the garden, so she also provided a knowledgeable introduction to that wonderful garden for me.

My first attendance to a Palm Society Biennial meeting was in 1974 in Florida, where I met Lucita in person for the first time. I obtained a copy of Lucita's earlier book "Fairchild Tropical Gardens—the First Ten Years," published in 1948 by the Roland Press in New York. It was fascinating reading, as was her later article on Fairchild Tropical Garden history published in the January 1967 issue of *Principes*. [Lucita's January 1967 *Principes* article is available as a

text file on the InterNet by anonymous ftp from RTP.PALMS.ORG by any Palm Society member or GENie users can also get it from the GENie PALM RT Software Library. The file is entitled FAIRCHIL.HIS].

Early biennial meetings were also where I met Mel Sneed. My primary memory of Mel is him roaming the grounds, examining as many palms as possible. He did that at most, if not all, of the biennials I attended until just a few years ago. He was always enthusiastic and quick to share his extensive travel and palm experiences with me and others in the Society. A quick browse through earlier issues of *Principes* will provide newer members with insight into many of his palm explorations, captured in the journal. Those trip reports make for fascinating reading. Mel's wife Phyllis and daughters, Sally Betts and Sarah Morlang, remain palm enthusiasts. They are each active in their respective IPS chapter activities.

Both Lucita and Mel will be much missed by those who were lucky enough to know them. I'm glad I can count myself amongst that number!

JIM CAIN