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## Palms Over L.A.: Conspicuous by Their Nature, Not Their Numbers

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Attendees at the 1996 International Palm Society Biennial Meeting in the Los Angeles area may be curious about the palms conspicuously gracing the skyline and seemingly found everywhere in the region. Many people, especially IPS members, are aware that there are no native palms occurring naturally in Los Angeles, a fact that surprises the uninformed since palms are so closely associated with and emblematic of this teeming and diverse metropolis and its irrepressible lifestyle. Whether it is tall fan palms silhouetted in the sunset, lining a beach, framing the Hollywood sign on the hills in back of the city, or even going up in flames when torched in a civil uprising, palms are the symbol of the city where image is everything and reality is often nothing. The reality in this instance is that the nearest naturally occurring palms are  $\approx$  160 km (100 miles) east of Los Angeles, around seeps and springs in desert canyons and arroyos at such well-known places as Palm Springs, Palm Desert, and Twentynine Palms. Here are some little-known facts about palms in and around Los Angeles, which, I hope, will help to increase the appreciation of these plants by visitor and resident alike.

### Prevalence of Palms in L. A.

Despite this close association of palms and Los Angeles, how really common are palms in this vast metropolis? Surprisingly, palms are not that common in the greater Los Angeles area. Using aerial, color-infrared photographic images obtained from a NASA U-2 overflight and corroborated with ground sampling, researchers at the University of California were able to map and determine the extent and composition of the urban vegetation of the Los Angeles basin, an area of 4 504 km<sup>2</sup> (1 760 square miles) stretching from west Los Angeles, Malibu, and the San Gabriel Valley through much of Orange County to the south. Miller and Winer (*Urban Ecology* 8:29-54. 1984)

determined that urban vegetation covered over half (58%) of the area, while natural vegetation (33%), agricultural land (2%), and nonvegetated areas (7%) covered the remainder.

After random sampling of 20 plots in the area covered by urban vegetation, Miller and Winer estimated that palms accounted for only 2% of all species, a figure that would be even less if naturally vegetated areas were included. The most common palms were the Mexican and California fan palms (Fig. 1) (*Washingtonia robusta* and *W. filifera*), the queen palm (*Syagrus roman-zoffiana*), and the Canary Island date palm (*Phoenix canariensis*). Shrubs (66%), trees (21%), ground covers (10%), and turfgrasses (1%) composed the remainder of the species.

Palms did not fare better in a follow-up study, either. Using data from the same sources as the earlier study, Brown and Winer (*Photogrammetric Engineering and Remote Sensing* 52:117-123. 1986) estimated that palms accounted for 0.7% of the areal cover in the urban vegetated area, a figure that shrinks to a minuscule 0.4% if the entire Los Angeles basin is included. Turfgrasses covered nearly half (48%) the urban vegetated area, followed by trees (35%), shrubs (11%), and ground covers (6%).

With palms accounting for only a minor portion of the urban vegetation in Los Angeles, one wonders how they have attained such worldwide notoriety and lofty status as the unofficial emblem of the city and its trend-setting, much imitated lifestyle. The reasons are many and related, and perhaps are connected to the alluring and enduring nature of the palms, their exotic, bold, dramatic foliage that quickly and conspicuously sets them apart from all other plants. In fact, the statements palms make in the landscape and the images they elicit are the same ones that attracted many, if not most, of us to these princesses of plants and their attendant society of devotion and worship.

Los Angeles' fascination with palms really began

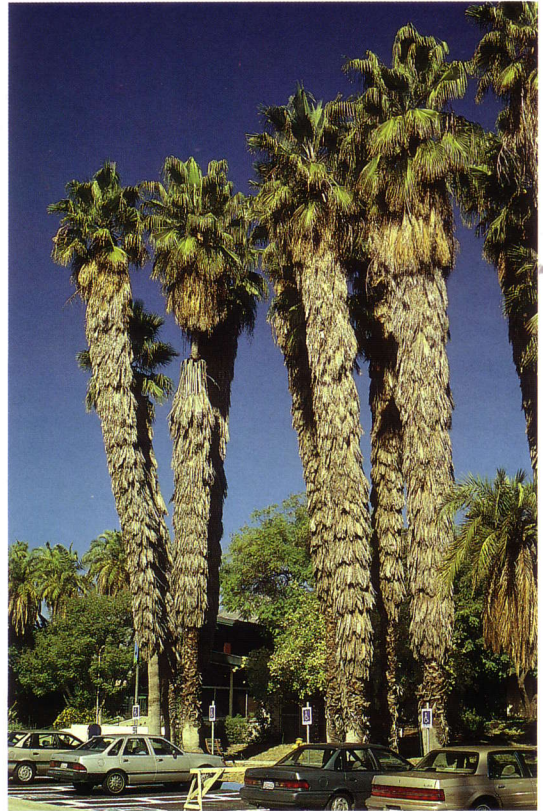
in the late 19th century when land speculators and developers recounted tales of year-round sun and warmth, orange groves, and palm-lined streets to residents of cold, snowy midwestern and eastern U.S. in a successful attempt to lure legions of buyers to newly developed subdivisions. There was some truth to the developers' wild claims; they did plant hundreds of thousands of palms, mostly fan palms, lining the boulevards of their otherwise empty subdivisions. Some of these 100-yr-old plantings still exist and the lofty palms are now 30 m (100 feet) tall or more.

Of course, it has helped more than just a little that Los Angeles developed into the center of our solar system for television and movies, the most influential and image-shaping media in the history of mankind. What better vehicles to trumpet and herald one's perception of how a city or culture is or should be than the little and big screens. Reality could take a back seat. Hollywood needed an emblem, something exotic and alluring yet natural, a picture worth a thousand words, to showcase to the world the image of Los Angeles it wanted to present. Conspicuous by their nature (not their numbers) and already in place, palms fit the bill perfectly. Lights! Camera! Action! The rest is history.

However, all is not just glittering tinsel in Tinseltown. It is not all hype; the facts and figures about palms' minor role in urban vegetation aren't reality. In a city where it is more important whom you are seen with and where you are seen, palms take a back seat to nobody. By their very bold, exotic, dramatic nature, palms have easily commanded the most visible, high profile, strategic locations in the city and landscape.

Palms line the streets and grace the residences from Beverly Hills and Malibu to south-central L.A. Palms decorate the entrances to shopping malls, restaurants, movie theaters, and the important public and private buildings. Palms are conspicuous in parks, near parking structures, and even by freeways. When a statement needs to be made in the landscape, everyone knows where to turn—not a maple, sycamore, ash, or birch, or eucalyptus, bottlebrush, paperbark, or pine, but rather a palm. And palms are not about to relinquish their soapbox and be relegated to the back lot, alley, or other low profile, less visible area.

The full story of palms' prominent role in urban vegetation is not told in the numbers and figures of the aerial photography and ground sampling. However, I cannot help but wonder what the results



1. The Mexican fan palm, *Washingtonia robusta*, is the most common palm around Los Angeles, and graces the skyline just about everywhere.

would have been if the researchers had the home and garden of an avid palm collector or two, like that of Ralph Velez for example, in their sampling plots. Talk about data going off the curve!

### Flower Market Palms

Palms can be found in the most unusual places and times in Los Angeles, like downtown at the flower market in the predawn hours. The Los Angeles wholesale flower market complex is the largest exchange of its kind in the Western Hemisphere. Only the world-famous Aalsmeer Flower Market in the Netherlands surpasses it in size. The Los Angeles Flower Market District, the official name for the flower market complex located in the 700 block of Wall Street, is composed of over 100 businesses handling potted and cut flowers and foliages and related products.

The Los Angeles Flower District is the hub of

Table 1. Palms in the Los Angeles Flower District.

Botanical name	Flower market name	Use
<i>Archontophoenix cunninghamiana</i>	king palm	2, 3
<i>Brahea armata</i>	blue fan palm	2
<i>Brahea edulis</i>	palm fiber	3d
<i>Butia capitata</i>	pindo palm	4
<i>Calamus</i> spp.	cane curl, cane spring, cane core	3d
<i>Caryota mitis</i>	fishtail palm	3, 4
<i>Caryota urens</i>	fishtail palm	3, 4
<i>Chamaedorea elegans</i>	neanthe bella, jumbo	3, 4
<i>Chamaedorea hooperiana</i>	mayan	3
<i>Chamaedorea metallica</i>	metallica	4
<i>Chamaedorea oblongata</i>		4
<i>Chamaedorea oreophila</i>	commodore	3
<i>Chamaedorea radicalis</i>	tepe, commodore	3
<i>Chamaedorea sartorii</i>	commodore, jade, emerald	3
<i>Chamaedorea seifrizii</i>	bamboo palm	4
<i>Chamaedorea tepejilote</i>	commodore, teepee, premium	3
<i>Chamaerops humilis</i>	Mediterranean fan palm	3
<i>Dypsis lutescens</i>	areca palm	3, 3d, 4
<i>Cocos nucifera</i>	coconut palm	3, 4
<i>Heterospatha</i> sp.		3, 3d
<i>Howea forsterana</i>	kentia, sentry palm	4
<i>Licuala grandis</i>	licuala	4
<i>Licuala spinosa</i>	licuala	4
<i>Livistona chinensis</i>		2, 4
<i>Oncosperma tigillarum</i>		4
<i>Phoenix canariensis</i>	date palm	2, 3
<i>Phoenix dactylifera</i>	date palm	2
<i>Phoenix reclinata</i>	date palm	3d
<i>Phoenix roebelenii</i>	pygmy date palm	3, 4
<i>Phoenix rupicola</i>	date palm	3
<i>Phoenix</i> sp.	date palm	3d
<i>Pinanga</i> sp.		2, 5
<i>Raphia farinifera</i>	raffia, palm fiber	3d
<i>Rhapis excelsa</i>	lady palm	3, 4
<i>Sabal</i> sp.	palmetto	3d
<i>Serenoa repens</i>	palmetto	3d
<i>Trachycarpus fortunei</i>	bronxe palm	1d, 3d
<i>Washingtonia filifera</i>	fan palm	2, 3
<i>Washingtonia robusta</i>	fan palm	5

Use codes: 1 = cut flowers or fruits

2 = cut branches with foliage, flowers, and/or fruits

3 = cut foliage

4 = potted foliage

5 = preserved dried whole plant

d = dried

an annual \$250 million flower and foliage wholesale movement in southern California. It is estimated that the flowers, foliages, and related products moved through the Wall Street complex have an annual value of nearly \$150 million. The bulk of market activity occurs between 2 a.m. and 8 a.m. on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings. Cut flowers and foliages originate from around the world, including California, continental USA, Hawaii, Mexico and Central America, South

America, Europe, Australia, southeast Asia, and South Africa. Potted flowers and foliages come mainly from California, Hawaii, and Florida.

Several years ago I surveyed flower and foliage movement in the Los Angeles Flower District (*A Survey of Commodity Movement on the Los Angeles Wholesale Flower Market*. 1985. Los Angeles: University of California Cooperative Extension). I updated the information last year. The survey showed that palms accounted for 39



2. This double *grand allée* of California fan palms, *Washingtonia filifera*, in Azusa is the largest grouping of these trees outside their native habitat. 3. These California fan palms at Rosedale Cemetery were planted in 1885.



4. The tallest Mexican fan palms in the Los Angeles area are at the Arboretum in Arcadia. They are 110 yr of age and well over 30 m (100 feet) tall. 5. These exceptional Mexican fan palms sway and lean in the ocean breezes in Santa Monica.

of the nearly 750 different plants exchanged on the flower market, or  $\approx 5\%$  of the total. While not large in quantity on the market, palms and their products are certainly conspicuous nonetheless. The intrepid palm adventurer, not satisfied with only seeing palms around the city during the day, will surely be rewarded with a very early-morning visit to the Los Angeles Flower District. Table 1 shows the palms appearing in the Los Angeles Flower District and in which form or use they were exchanged.

Most palms appeared on the market as cut foliage and/or potted plants. Cut leaves, usually offered in bundles of a dozen or more, mainly originated locally except for those of *Chamaedorea*, which were imported from Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. Some rather novel offerings were the cut entire or partial inflorescences or infructescences of palms. Spectacular items in this category included inflorescences of *Archon-*

*tophoenix cunninghamiana*, *Brahea armata*, *Livistona chinensis*, and *Washingtonia filifera*, and infructescences of *Phoenix canariensis* and *P. dactylifera*. These last products all originated locally. Perhaps the most unusual items were the whole preserved, dried plants of *Pinanga* and *Washingtonia robusta*. In some cases, preserved, dried stems of *Pinanga* were found topped with preserved dried leaves of *Dypsis lutescens*, while similarly treated stems of *Heterospatha* were topped with *Pinanga* leaves.

Remembering that Los Angeles has no native, naturally occurring palms, it is remarkable that of the 39 species of palms (or their products) exchanged in the Los Angeles Flower District, 27 (nearly 75%) originated locally from cultivated plants. This figure underscores the importance of cultivated palms in the urban landscape and the creativity and resourcefulness of sellers who economically and ingeniously exploit them.



6. Planted in the 1880s, these Canary Island date palms, *Phoenix canariensis*, in Elysian Park were part of the first arboretum in Los Angeles. 7. This exceptional pygmy date palm, *Phoenix roebelinii*, at Mt. St. Mary's College has more than 100 heads.



### Exceptional Palms

Palms have also played a prominent role in specific historic and cultural events and places around Los Angeles. In 1988, I authored a book, *Exceptional Trees of Los Angeles* (Arcadia, CA: California Arboretum Foundation), which identified and documented individual trees or mass plantings of the same tree, which, due to their age, size, esthetic quality, and historic or cultural value, were exceptional. Palms comprised 12 of the total of 185 trees designated as exceptional in the book. Not surprisingly, the Mexican and California fan palms, with three specimens each, had the most listed as exceptional, followed by the Canary Island date palm with two, and the king palm, Guadalupe fan palm, fountain palm, and pygmy date palm with one each.

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8. This row of fountain palms, *Livistona*, lends a formal atmosphere at the Huntington Botanical Gardens in San Marino. 9. Over 200 mature king palms, *Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*, in a dense grove at the Virginia Robinson Botanical Garden in Beverly Hills are a spectacular sight.





10. This intriguing Mexican fan palm is not far from Cal Tech in Pasadena.

Perhaps the two oldest California fan palms in the Los Angeles area survive behind a residence in San Marino, not far from the Huntington Botanical Gardens. Dug by a prospector as seedlings from a native stand in a desert canyon behind Palm Springs, and after surviving an arduous journey by burro, they were planted in the late 1840s at their present location near a spring providing water for the San Gabriel Mission. In the early 1900s, a train station was built at the site and named Palms in honor of the twin landmarks. Left standing as a residential area developed around them, the two palms still tower over a home and are landmarks to this day.

A spectacular planting of more than 200 old mature California fan palms in a double *grande allée* at the entrance to Monrovia Nursery Company in Azusa (Fig. 2) is the largest grouping of these trees outside their native habitat. A similarly impressive planting of the same species and dating to 1885 is at Rosedale Cemetery in central Los Angeles (Fig. 3).

The largest Mexican fan palms in Los Angeles are 100 yr of age and well over 30 m (100 feet)

tall. E. J. "Lucky" Baldwin planted them on his estate, Rancho Santa Anita in Arcadia, today known as The Arboretum of Los Angeles County (Fig. 4). A dramatic planting of Mexican fan palms is along the promenade on the bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean in Palisades Park, Santa Monica (Fig. 5). The double-row planting sways and bends with the brisk, prevailing ocean breezes.

Santa Monica is also home to an astounding, mile-long, parkway planting of Canary Island date palms, situated along Ocean Avenue in Palisades Park above the ocean. Another exceptional planting of Canary Island date palms is at Elysian Park just northeast of downtown Los Angeles (Fig. 6). Planted in the 1880s, this *grand allée* is unsurpassed in number, age, and size of trees, and is a remnant planting of the historic Chavez Ravine Arboretum, the first in Los Angeles.

Not to be overshadowed by its larger relatives, an exceptional pygmy date palm with more than 100 distinct but closely packed heads (Fig. 7) is on the grounds of the Doheny Campus of Mt. St. Mary's College in the West Adams district of Los Angeles.



Two plantings of palms at the Huntington Library, Art Gallery & Botanical Gardens in San Marino are but a small part of the numerous trees designated there as exceptional. A row of fountain palms (Fig. 8) lines the formal north vista from the Art Gallery, and a stunning double-row grouping of Guadalupe fan palms stands watch along a drive.

An exceptional grove of king palms, perhaps the largest planting of this species outside its native Australia, surrounds the main house at the Virginia Robinson Botanical Garden in Beverly Hills (Fig. 9), an affiliate of The Arboretum of Los Angeles

County. Robinson, an heiress of the Robinson's department store fortune, planted the grove in 1915 around her home, then the first big estate in Beverly Hills. Specimens of all ages and sizes comprising successive generations intermingle with the parent trees. The dense grove is much as one would find it in its native rain forest habitat.

In closing, I offer a most peculiar but exceptional Mexican fan palm. Although it took some time, this rather avant-garde specimen, near Cal Tech in Pasadena and seemingly with a mind of its own, finally did respond correctly to geotrophic forces and grew upwards (Fig. 10).

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## CHAPTER NEWS AND EVENTS *(Continued from p. 92)*

*Chamaedorea tepijilote*, *Laccospadix australisica*, *Bentinckia nicobarica*, *Arenga englerii*, *A. pinnata*, *Borassus flabellifera*, *Livistona mariae*, *L. chinensis*, *Elaeis guineensis*, *Rhapis excelsa*, *Phoenix canariensis*, *P. roebelenii*, *Washingtonia* sp., and *Roystonea* palms. The visit to the gardens was followed by a BBQ, tea and sweets, then by a raffle. A nice *Pigafetta filiaris* brought from Mackay was the first plant to be auctioned.

Sunday, December 3, started with a visit to David Faces to view his cycads and palms. Then to the garden of Jill Stanke, by way of the Rockhampton markets. The Stanke garden has lovely mature palms in the rear of the garden, with lots of foliage plants underneath. From here to the gardens of Jan McCart and Lou Randell, plus stops at a few local nurseries to gather even more plants for the return to Mackay.

Farleigh Mill Palm Gardens were the scene for the December 10 break-up party, jointly held with the Mackay Woodturners. There was a very interesting plant raffle with several "mystery parcels."

### News from Southern Queensland

The Southern Queensland Group (SQG) of PACSOA has changed its venue for 1996, now meeting in United Church, New Farm. The venue was recognized as a great improvement. At the January meeting, there was a fine selection of about 25 plants on the raffle table, ranging from large *Encephalartos*, four species of *Dioon*, and

species of *Zamia*, *Pinanga*, *Ravenea*, and *Areca*, just to name a few. There was also a seed of the forest coconut, *Voanioala gerardii*, from Madagascar, recently described in the *Palms of Madagascar* book published by Kew Gardens and the International Palm Society. Local SQG elections were also held at the January meeting: President, Vic Wilkins; Treasurer, Nick Craig; and Secretary, Rudy Meyer. A meeting to plan the Annual show was held on February 19.

The Annual Show at Mt. Coot-tha Botanical Gardens was held on March 2 and 3. As usual, thousands of palms and cycads were on show and sale. Note that the Department of Environment and Heritage prohibited the sale of a number of plants, including the foxtail palm, *Wodyetia bifurcata*, and most, if not all, of the Queensland cycads, unless they had the department's sale-approval tags. This action was designed by DEH to limit traffic in endangered native species.

The March 18 Meeting was held at the United Church. Further meetings planned so far for 1996 include May 20 and June 15. An outing to the Sunshine Coast was planned for April 21 as was a June 16 outing at a venue to be advised.

### News from Gold Coast-Tweed (Australia)

The Gold Coast-Tweed Palm & Cycad Society of PACSOA met on December 10 at Mt. Tam-

*(Continued on p. 113)*