

Principes, 40(4), 1996, pp. 197-198

An update on Palms in Puerto Rico

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This past May-June, 1995, I had an opportunity to revisit friends and family in Puerto Rico. I was especially looking forward to this visit, because during the last Biennial to Venezuela, I had the occasion to meet Hector Rivera, a very enthusiastic Palm Society member who happens to work at the Botanical Garden in Rio Piedras, which is associated with the University of Puerto Rico. Up until now, I had never had the good fortune to get acquainted with anyone at the Botanical Gardens, either in Mayaguez or Rio Piedras, with any genuine interest in palms. Hector is relatively new to palms, but has all the enthusiasm of someone who has been bitten by the bug. He wants desperately to get the Island (Puerto Rico) to lessen its self-imposed restriction on importing seeds from outside the Island. There is real fear of Lethal Yellowing, which, to my knowledge, has not shown up there yet. One palm grower in particular, Dominique Gilormini, from Patillas, has many, many acres of dwarf coconut palms under cultivation and they are much in demand from the large hotel and industrial complex industry on the island.

On June 8, 1995, Hector picked me up from where I was staying in Bayamon, a large suburb in the San Juan area. He took me to the other side of the island in the south-east portion and there I had the opportunity to meet Dominique Gilormini. He was quite gracious and offered us some home-grown grape juice. He stated that he is growing some four varieties of dwarf coconuts. Hector and I spent a couple of hours there and decided to head back home to Bayamon. On the way we passed a large palm nursery that he had never seen before and we decided to go in and check it out. There we met Alfonso Carrero, agronomist, who was in charge of the entire operation. The farm consisted of about 1 500 acres of which about 80% was devoted to palms. What amazed me was the tremendous increase in the planting of *Syagrus romanzoffiana* (the Queen

palm) and *Washingtonia robusta* (the Mexican fan palm). These palms were being used for street planting and landscaping in new shopping centers. At this nursery, mostly what we saw, beside the two most common palms in California, were *Aiphanes acanthophylla*, *Hyophorbe verschaffeltii*, *Livistona chinensis*, *Areca catechu*, *Cocos nucifera*, *Roystonea borinquena*, *Chamaerops humilis*, which on my last trip, I was informed was quite rare, *Pritchardia pacifica*, and *Dypsis cabadae*. Alfonso seemed quite interested in the Palm Society and I gave him an application to join.

The next day, Hector came by again, quite early, to take me to the largest nursery on the Island, Margo Farms. I was introduced first to Pascual Marranzini, a sales representative and then to a former Californian, Mick Parzanese. He took us on a tour of the nursery, and it was there that I saw perhaps the only specimen of *Bismarckia nobilis* on the Island. Unfortunately, Puerto Rico is light years behind Florida, California, and Hawaii, as far as the variety of species is concerned, and now they are planting Mexican fan and Queen palms. Well, they are fast and cheap. Need we say more. Howeas are also being grown for the indoor trade. That afternoon was spent in checking out several other nurseries that specialized in palms. *Cyrtostachys renda* was available in some nurseries, but was very expensive. Apparently, new species do show up on the island from time to time, but no one wants to take credit for it. I definitely get the impression that it is taboo to bring seed or palms into the Island, but it does occur. I do hope the restriction of seed importation does become officially more relaxed.

The following week on June 14, Hector once again graciously picked me up in Bayamon to take me to the Botanical Garden in Rio Piedras. We arrived at the Jardin Botanico in a short time, and there I met Henri Llogier, taxonomist, who escorted me through the Palmetum. I was particularly happy

to see that they have planted a fairly large number of an endangered Island species, *Calyptronoma rivalis*. Outside of its native habitat in San Sebastian on the outer side of the island, the only one was in the Botanical Garden in Mayaguez, and that one at this time looked as if it were dying. I was very happy to see this palm established in the Rio Piedras Botanical Garden. Ironically, I have two species of *Calyptronoma* from Cuba in my collection, but none from Puerto Rico. Three of the most impressive palms in the garden were two huge *Corypha* species. They were not yet in flower, but probably about 35 years old, a fairly large *Cyrtostachys renda* and the American oil palm, *Elaeis oleifera*, a relative of the African oil palm, but to me, more ornamental. The garden also had some *Licuala spinosa*, *L. peltata*, and *L. grandis*, which I had not seen previously. I recall also seeing representatives of *Livistona decipens*, *Attalea* sp., *Pritchardia pacifica*, *Caryota mitis*, *C. urens*, *Dypsis lutescens*, *D. cabadae*, and *Hyophorbe verschaffeltii*. They also had *Cryosophila* species available in the nursery. The gardens were, all in all, very attractive and well taken care of. To my way of thinking, the only thing lacking was an aggressive program of new introductions. Hopefully, that will change in the near future with the efforts of Hector Rivera.

That afternoon, Javier Garcia, my wife's nephew picked me up at the Botanical Garden. I was completely soaked to the skin. I was caught touring the garden without an umbrella when a down-pour nailed me. By the time I got to a building, it was too late. We headed off to El Yunque, a rain forest on the island under the protection of the United States Federal Parks Service. That morning I was introduced to George Proctor, a natural resource specialist, who worked at the Botanical Garden. His primary interest is in ferns,

and when I told him of a strong desire to see a particular fern in the rain forest, he told me where I could find it. That afternoon, I did. In the past, on visits to El Yunque, I just never went up far enough. This time we did, and I saw enough to thoroughly satisfy me. The only palm indigenous to the rain forest is *Prestoea montana*, and believe me, it is not endangered at all. Seeds drop every winter, and I could see them sprouting all over the place. Ferns, orchids, and bromeliads cover the trunks profusely. Although not considered a prop root palm, thick plump roots jut out from the trunks on steep hillsides to help support the palm. The palm does not have a clearly distinguishable crownshaft, but the glossiness of the fronds are especially attractive. I'm so glad that they can grow in California, although they are not at all common even in palm collections. Mine is just beginning to form a clear trunk. This palm is not seen at all in the San Juan metropolitan area. Hector had brought back a seedling to see if it will grow. It might just be too hot. The temperatures in El Yunque were decidedly comfortable, not so at sea level. The next time I go, I hope to see the Elfin Forest in El Yunque. It is at the highest elevations of about 4 000 feet. There the trees are dwarfed due to the constant winds, cooler temperatures, and higher humidity. Rainfall is in the neighborhood of 250 inches per year.

The next day we left Puerto Rico, USA to return to California, and the day after that I gave a slide presentation on the Palm Society Biennial in Venezuela to the Los Angeles International Fern Society. Hopefully, the next time I visit Puerto Rico, Hector Rivera may be well on his way to establishing a IPS Chapter on the Island, and we may begin to see mass importation of seed from the seed bank and other seed sources.