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Coccothrinax barbadensis in Antigua

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The island of Antigua, some 360 km east of Puerto Rico, is located almost at the northern extreme of the chain of the Lesser Antilles and represents a very nice sample of the island chain. A good part of the island population belongs to the Rastafari religion and is proud of their reddish dreadlocks. English is spoken with a tasty Caribbean accent and the whole island shines in a tropical atmosphere.

The landscapes of Antigua appear quite dry, except for some secondary rain forest present in the south. A part of the island has always been xeric, as shown by the presence of some native cacti such as *Melocactus intortus* and *Cephalocereus royenii*, but the land now occupied by a savannah-like vegetation, mostly composed of *Cymbopogon citratus* (a lemon-scented grass), was originally covered by some more developed vegetation, at least a "*Bursera simaruba* seasonal forest" or a dry scrub.

Antigua falls within the natural distribution of *Coccothrinax barbadensis*, a well-known palm that originally occurred in all the Lesser Antilles, including some larger islands such as Puerto Rico at the northern limit of its range and Trinidad, Tobago, and Margarita at the southern end. R.W. Read in his work published in 1979 lamented that this palm had been exterminated in the wild in many of the lesser Antilles.

A quick tour of Antigua would make one think that the native palm is totally extinct on the island; however, some very old and tall isolated specimens survive here and there, totally unable to reproduce themselves. The seedlings cannot become established because of the absence of shelter from surrounding vegetation.

The environmental deterioration on the island has been mostly due to overexploitation of land by cattle grazing. Cows and horses were introduced by the earliest European colonists who also burned most of the forest to provide pasture for the cattle, which became, in the following centuries, the

main richness of the island, together with sugarcane. Nowadays many cows are still happily wandering in the Antiguan fields and roads.

Surprisingly and thankfully a very healthy stand of *C. barbadensis* survives in an unusual location: the old cemetery of the island and the adjoining garden of the small cathedral. These two plots were the only sacred territories and therefore are prohibited to cows. They are half abandoned and plants grow with little interference by men. In the graveyard the palms are at their best: some *Coccothrinax* are literally and macabrely coming up from the tombs. This may provide opportunities for palmistic transcendental interpretations.

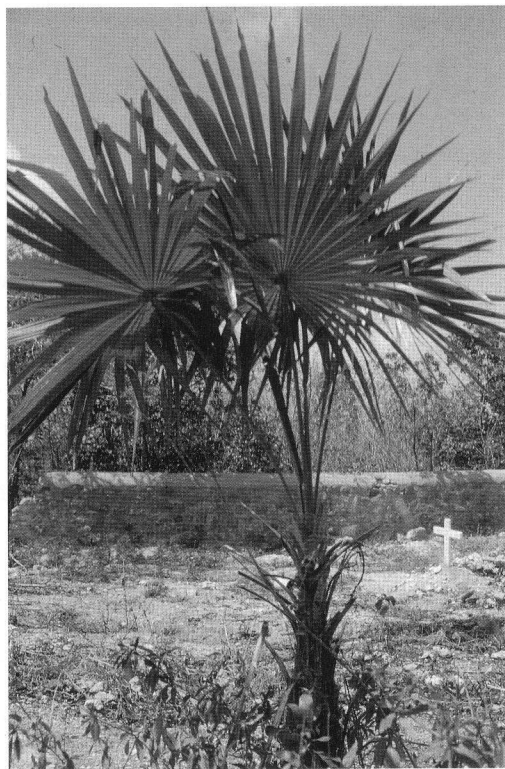
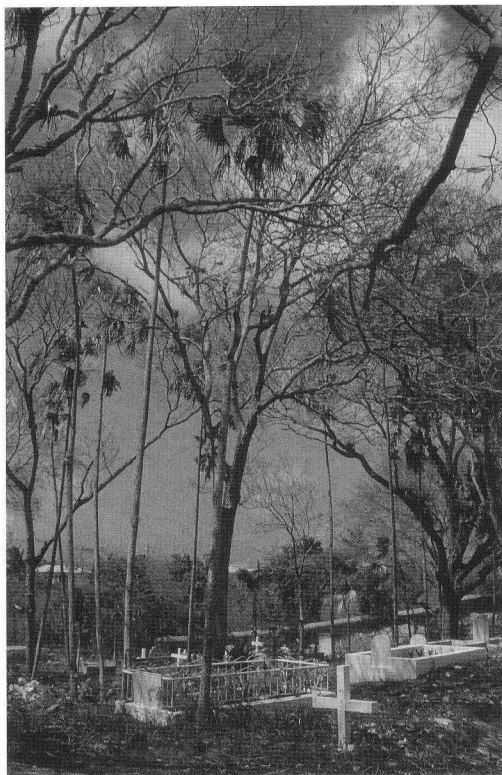
The palms regularly set seed and succeed in reproducing themselves. Seedlings grow easily inside the sacred areas and even outside, but those that grow outside the fence never reach maturity because the occasional passing animal enjoys its green parts as a meal.

In this case a small fence would be enough to protect part of the unused land around the "prohibited sacred plots" and to double in a few years the size of the population of *Coccothrinax* and of other plant species that share its fate.

Free introduced herbivores are the worst "living" menace to ecosystems after man, especially in small islands, where the land is limited and great predators are usually absent.

In another Caribbean island, Nevis, I have seen an enchanting hill coated with a perfectly mown lawn and spotted with tall and beautiful coconut trees. The authors of this marvel were a group of goats that "ate" all the rain forest and its regrowth. This charming disaster was luckily limited to a small area and Nevis has one of the most beautiful forests of the Lesser Antilles.

I cannot end this report from Antigua without mentioning that in an area called All Saints, in the center of the island, there is a breathtaking population of many thousands of escaped *Phoenix reclinata*, whose origin is totally unknown. Paul



1. *Coccothrinax barbadensis* outside the Cathedral in Antigua. 2. *Coccothrinax barbadensis* surviving in a cemetery, Antigua. 3. *Coccothrinax barbadensis*, juvenile plant.

Richnow and I thought they were *P. theophrasti*, but *Flora of the Lesser Antilles* reports: "*Phoenix spinosa* Schum. (= *P. reclinata* Jacq.) was reported in Antigua by Grisebach (Fl.Br. W. Ind. Isl. 513 1864)." The seeds are not very fleshy but local people eat them occasionally.

Other palms noted were *Acrocomia aculeata* and (imported?) *Sabal causiarum*. Some imported *Attalea* sp. were thriving in the *Cymbopogon* savannah and many other beautiful and sometimes rare exotic palms were growing in the gardens designed by Paul, whose job is as a landscape architect.

Acknowledgments

A great "thank you" to Paul Richnow, who hosted me at his home in Antigua, giving me the possibility to visit and appreciate the island. I wish also to salute my Miamian friend Paul Drummond, who provided me the *Palmae* abstract of the book mentioned below.

LITERATURE CITED

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CHAPTER NEWS AND EVENTS

Palm & Cycad Society of Southwest Florida

1996 ended with the October 26 meeting held at Sam and Hattie Lou Smith's place on the Orange River in Buckingham. The Smiths drew a large turn-out of palm and cycad enthusiasts who came to tour several acres of palms, cycads, bromeliads, and orchids planted under a canopy of huge oaks.

The first meeting of 1997 was held February 22 at the home of Dick Fankhausers in McGregor Woods. After Dr. Frank Martin gave a talk on Edible Palms, the group toured Dick's garden as well as his neighbor Ray's collection.

During the business meeting, the following topics were discussed.

Newsletter—the chapter is looking for someone to write or help out with the newsletter. Since there were no volunteers at this meeting, Sally Betts will continue as editor for the time being.

A community project—Palm and Cycad garden showplace.

Compiling a list of rare palm and cycad specimens in the area;

Development of the chapter logo.

Raffle plants—attendees are encouraged to bring items for the raffle. A suggestion was made that the chapter purchase a couple of quality plants from the proceeds of the pre-

vious raffle. We would like to have a plant raffle at each meeting to cover chapter expenses. Attendees are encouraged to bring raffle plants (which do not necessarily have to be a palm or cycad), horticultural items, books, etc.

The April 26 meeting will be held at the home of Dr. Bob Read. Dr. Read will be speaking on Tropical Rainforest Palms of Costa Rica. He will also give us a tour of his own personal rainforest.

New members and guests are welcome to attend meetings. There is a \$10 initial membership fee to help defer the costs of the newsletter. Meetings are held on the fourth Saturday of even numbered months; there will be no meetings during the months of November and December, due to the holidays.

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News from The Palm Society of South Texas

The Palm Society of South Texas (PSST) IPS chapter held a field trip to northern Mexico in early December, spending four days looking at palms. Very large stands of *Brahea dulcis* and *B. decumbens* were visited, as well as other palm venues.

The members in the Texas Coast Bend area met with the Corpus Christi Botanical Gardens on Feb-