

Principes, 42(4), 1998, pp. 193-194

Palm Society Membership: Looking Ahead To the 21st Century

JOHN CRESSEY AND GREGORY HAINES
2170 Mendocino Lane, Altadena, CA, 91001

In less than 50 years the International Palm Society has become truly global in its support of research, publications, new chapters, and new understandings of palms. The discovery of new species and the economic effects of palms on different cultures and societies continue to be topics of discussion in *Principes*, magazines, and sometimes the media in general. However, as we approach the next century it seems to us important for the International Palm Society to recall that the organization was founded not only by the need for scientific inquiry, but also by the love of palm enthusiasts who wanted more information on how to grow palms in their own gardens in a particular region. Dent Smith wrote early-on to Pauleen Sullivan that the Palm Society was founded not just for researchers but for "dirt gardeners." Even so, the Palm Society has often changed lives and even careers for many members who have become researchers, commercial growers, seed experts, or even just world travelers to see palms in habitat. As we approach the next century, it is important for our organization to discuss ways for our membership to continue to grow and to reach out to a wide-range of palm interests so that our publications, research, and explorations will remain secure and go forward. In short, the Palm Society's future depends on new members and our organization's recognition that the membership has diverse interests.

We discovered the Palm Society by chance on a rainy April afternoon in 1977 at Strybing Arboretum and Botanical Gardens in San Francisco. To escape a surprise downpour we settled into an unexpected afternoon in the library where book after book relating to palms was brought to us by an amused and charming librarian. "You boys ought to join the Palm Society!" she finally said. We smiled and laughed. "You mean, like reading palms and fortune telling?" we joked. "No, there really is a Palm Society and we have a group right here in the Bay Area. I

think I have a phone number." She returned with the phone number of Warren Dolby in Oakland who we later learned was one of the original members of the Society.

That phone call the same evening changed our lives. Warren invited us to his garden in the Oakland hills, an acre of landscaped trails, fountains, pools, and views, with mature palms and tropicals that was as magical as it was overwhelming. Ever the host and noticing our amazement, Warren immediately said, "Join the Palm Society and you'll have it all too!" Within two years we bought the property next to Warren and our mutual gardens were part of the Biennial Tour in 1984. Moreover, we began to learn that we were not the only "palmnuts" and our journeys to discover palms began in earnest to Hawaii, Florida, Mexico, the Caribbean, Australia, Asia and on and on. It was a joy to learn about the early founders of the Palm Society, to read Harold Moore's pathfinding work, and eventually to meet and talk with Lucita Wait, Dick Douglas, Paul Drummond, Mardy Darian, Natalie Uhl, and John Dransfield.

Although our knowledge of palms has grown immensely, we remain primarily palm enthusiasts. Happy to attend lectures and learn more (we can recite Latin names now with great ease), but are still overwhelmed by the beauty of a single palm in the twilight of a local garden or a hillside of ceroxylon palms in the mountains of Ecuador. And we have continued to think about palms as the focal point of our new Southern California garden that replaces one lost (along with Warren's) in the Oakland Firestorm of 1991.

Thus, we suggest to our membership as we enter this new century, that we consider our organization's need for new people . . . new members who share a variety of enthusiasms for palms: growing palms, cultivating palms, helping scientific inquiry, and perhaps just enjoying knowing more about palms and responding to their beauty

and diversity. We suggest that our members talk about their interest in palms with friends, and help potential new members not to be initially overwhelmed with conversations punctuated with botanical names and the latest “must have” palm craze. “He who dies with the most palm species wins!” has become the mantra for some members and that is certainly a worthwhile life-long goal for some. However, we suggest that we all will win if we can find new ways to secure a growing membership that includes the hobbyist, the dirt gardener, the tropical landscaper, the grower, the researcher, as well as the most competitive collector who wants the biggest, most mature and spectacular palm garden in the world.

In the past years, we have made a concerted effort to bring potential new members into the Palm Society. Our friend, Doris Devine, grows palms in her Chicago apartment and enjoys the palms at nearby Lincoln Park Conservatory. (She traveled with the Society to Australia and will be at the biennial in Thailand.) We met Gary Carr at a recent dinner party and happened to mention the Palm Society. He was amazed there was such an organization and had been developing a palm garden on his own by saving palms he found being discarded from the hallways of Beverly Hills office buildings! He came to the last meeting, joined immediately, and, of course, is now speaking fluent “Palmese.” (We think he would be surprised that some of our members call gardens with familiar palms, as opposed to the latest Madagascar palms, “trash gardens.”) If we look only to those who can afford large collections and elaborate gardens with rare palms at the local chapter level, we are going to miss experiencing the joy and creativity of those with different gardening and landscaping goals that feature or just include palms—and their different and equally important reasons for joining the Palm Society.

In looking ahead to the next century, we suggest that the Palm Society continue to explore new ways to help our membership grow and flourish. Certainly, new members are the lifeblood of any such organization. We need the growers, the scientists, and the enthusiasts to continue our efforts on all levels. If we cease to actively include a continuum of interests—researcher to hobbyist—the organization will be less dynamic and less enriched.

We encourage all members to bring a guest to the next chapter meeting and welcome them. As your life was changed by membership in the Palm Society, perhaps there will be some one standing next to you in a line or at a party and you will mention your love of palms, and thereby change their lives: “Oh, did you know there is an organization called the Palm Society!” Perhaps *Principes* would like to consider asking for ideas via a “Forum on Membership” from its chapters about how local organizations can help the Palm Society membership grow in the 21st Century. What has proved effective and what else might we consider to spread the word about the Palm Society? Ideas might include notice of our organization at local colleges, arboretums, gardens, nurseries or horticultural/gardening events as well as our websites on the Internet. Local media often look for stories related to botanical interests. Membership applications should continue to be included in each *Principes* and local newsletters. Like other societies, perhaps gift memberships should be encouraged. Our theory, however, is that it is still the individual member mentioning the Palm Society to a friend or new acquaintance that has primarily increased our membership and continued our mission over the past 50 years.