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Bill Manley: In Appreciation of a Palm Pioneer

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Mr. Manley's home just off a busy state highway outside of Atlanta has become not just a place for someone to live. It has emerged as a dwelling with a sense of history, all of it provided by Mr. Manley. After all, the man is 93 years old, and he has lived there since 1963.

Bill Manley has been growing palms for longer than most of us have been alive. This extraordinary man, who bought his first palm during the Great Depression, still loves the princes of plants just as much now as the first time he saw a *Sabal palmetto* in a sunny North Carolina town.

A walk through Mr. Manley's yard is an invitation to storytelling. Each palm has a history. By the patio are a grouping of *Sabal minor* var. *louisiana* that Mr. Manley bought as seedlings during a trip to visit IPS Founding President Dent Smith in Daytona Beach, FL. By the pond is a large *Persea borbonia* that Mr. Manley grew from seed collected on a trip to the Georgia coast. A rock wall on the slope behind the house was built by Mr. Manley a few years ago using rocks from a chimney on his great-great-grandfather's farm in Meriwether County, GA—a farm, by the way, that Mr. Manley still owns. A patio off his back door was constructed especially for the several large *Sabal palmetto* that shade and cool the back on hot summer days and lend a touch of the tropics on frosty winter mornings.

Here is a man who has seen most of the 20th Century, a man who graduated from high school six years before the Crash of 1929, who has outlived two wives and several cherished dogs, who has raised children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He was successful in one business—building and repairing pipe organs—and after retiring, started another successful business, this time repairing player pianos. Many would say he has lived a full life.

Yet Mr. Manley still loves today. He keeps up

with current events. He has many friends, and the telephone rings constantly. Some of the calls are from friends and some are questions from people in Missouri or Massachusetts or Virginia, all of whom have heard of Mr. Manley and have called to seek the advice of this pioneer who was growing palms when no one else was. Mr. Manley has influenced many palm lovers in Atlanta and around the world.

Between calls Mr. Manley worries about an offer on his property. "The woman said she wants to live here, but I know she just wants to build a subdivision," he said. Like many areas of metro Atlanta, Stockbridge is growing rapidly and old farmsteads and tracts of timber are succumbing to the bulldozer and the asphalt paver. If he cannot stop his home from seeing the same fate, he feels he can at least stave it off for the rest of his life.

If he feels protective, he certainly has a right. You won't find junipers and red-tip photinias at this house. Indeed, his palms are in many ways a part of his family. They surround his house in Stockbridge, lending the brick ranch character and definition. His 20-acre property is filled with most of the species of palms that can be grown in the Georgia Piedmont, including *Sabal palmetto*, *Sabal minor*, *Trachycarpus fortunei*, *Rhapidophyllum hystrix* (Figs. 1, 2), and *Chamaerops humilis*. Their sizes range from 25-foot cabbage palms to the seedling *Trachycarpus* that have begun naturalizing beneath the mature palms. Twelve-foot needle palms with four-foot trunks loom like behemoths on the front lawn. *Sabal minor* with emerging stems fan down a grassy slope in back toward a crystal-clear pond filled with bass and bream and surrounded by bald cypress and *Magnolia virginiana*.

But Mr. Manley will readily admit that he was not always an expert—and that his vast knowledge of palms did not come easily. After all, in the 1920s there was no internet, no *Principes*, no



1. Bill Manley and dog on the patio with *Sabal minor* in the foreground and *S. palmetto* and *Rhipidophyllum hystrix* in the background.

Palm Society, and the first time this native of Atlanta saw a palm tree was just after his high school graduation. He remembers the experience as if it were yesterday and not some 76 years ago. Mr. Manley accepted a friend's invitation to visit him in Wilmington, NC and did what today might seem impossible: he hopped on his bicycle and rode for three days and more than 400 miles—all on dirt roads—to the coastal North Carolina city. It was his first time seeing the Atlantic Ocean.

"The streets of Wilmington were lined with palmettos. I guess they still are," Mr. Manley said. "I rode the streetcar out to Wrightsville Beach and stayed there for two weeks with a friend. There were Big Bands playing on the boardwalk every night, and I had the time of my life." The experience of sun, sea, and palms enchanted the young man.

Several years later Mr. Manley married a girl whose parents lived in a Florida boom town called Miami. He and his wife frequently took

the train from Atlanta to Miami, and Mr. Manley recalls looking out wistfully at the dwindling tropical vegetation on the way back to Atlanta. But on one trip during a stop in the small town of Fort Valley, southwest of Macon, GA, Mr. Manley spied a *Sabal palmetto*, the first he had seen in middle Georgia and only 80 miles south of Atlanta.

"I asked the conductor about it. I call him the first palm nut in Georgia, because he knew all about it," Mr. Manley said, chuckling. "He said a fellow had brought it back from Savannah Beach. I couldn't believe it. I knew there were cabbage palms in Albany, but I never thought they'd grow up here."

The palm had about six feet of trunk at the time. Mr. Manley produced photos of it taken in 1998, showing a 40-foot *Sabal* surrounded by innumerable progeny ranging from seedlings to fully mature palms with 25 feet of trunk.

This sighting piqued Mr. Manley's interest in growing palms in Atlanta. Could it be possible? Several more years would pass before he tried growing his own, mainly because he had nowhere to plant them. "I didn't have a house, a lot—I didn't have anything."

But not long after moving into his first home in Atlanta, a friend told him that he had seen some palms at a local nursery. "That perked my ears up," Mr. Manley said. "When I went down to the nursery, the fellow said he had two palms he called needle palms. He wanted \$2.50 apiece for them, so I only got one." Four moves and 62 years later, that *Rhaphidophyllum hystrix* resides happily in front of Mr. Manley's home, testimony to 12 bits well spent.

Not long after, in 1937, Mr. Manley started his own business building and repairing pipe organs. As might be expected, a pipe organ repair man must make house calls, and Mr. Manley probably has traveled every road in Georgia, from hemlock-clad mountains to great stretches of pine forest clothed with *Serenoa repens*.

It was in Madison, GA, the middle Georgia town so beautiful that William T. Sherman refused to burn it during the War Between the States, that Bill Manley saw the palm tree he knew he could grow in Atlanta. At a house on the Old Post Road, which at one time was the main artery between New Orleans and Charleston, Mr. Manley saw a large *Trachycarpus fortunei*.

"Of course I didn't know what it was at the time," Mr. Manley said. The woman of the house



2. *Trachycarpus fortunei* and *Rhaphidophyllum hystrix* on Bill Manley's property.

said she had gotten hers from Fruitlands Nursery in Augusta (now the site of the Augusta National Golf Club) to replace one given her by a Dr. Hunt in Eatonton. "When I got home I wrote a letter for the catalog from Fruitlands. I didn't know the address, so I just put 'Fruitlands Nursery, Augusta, Georgia.' Back in those days you didn't have to know the whole address—if you just put the name and the city it got there."

In due time the catalog from Fruitlands arrived, with "Fortune's Chusan Palm" listed for \$1.75. Mr. Manley promptly ordered one.

"That palm grew mightily," Mr. Manley said. Unfortunately, when he moved he put the palm under a drain spout, where the excess moisture killed it. "I was still learning about palms then." In 1956 Bill Manley joined the fledgling Palm Society, and he still belongs. In later years he often wrote of his experiences in *The Palm Quarterly*, the ground-breaking journal of the Temperature Zone Chapter of IPS edited by Tamar Myers.

"He was an inspiration," Tamar said. Tamar

edited (and often wrote much of) *The Palm Quarterly* from 1984 to 1992, when she moved to balmy South Carolina. "I sort of look at him as the grandfather of the hardy palm people. He was there when all this started."

One of the many people Bill Manley influenced through *The Palm Quarterly* was Gerry McKinness, who grew up in Miami and now lives in nearby McDonough, GA, where he owns a thriving mail-order palm nursery specializing in cold-hardy palms. "I had read his articles in PQ, and he influenced me—I thought I'd have to leave all my palms behind," Gerry said. "When I saw his *Sabal palmettos*, which were just huge, it inspired me to try. He's always been generous with his knowledge—and more than generous with his needle palm seed!"

Unlike many people his age, Mr. Manley shows no signs of slowing down. He complained that once he sits in a chair he has difficulty getting back out, but his strength is such that dragging a heavy wooden chair across carpet for a

visitor posed no difficulty for him. He spoke of plans for the next day, the next season, the next year. He planned to take cuttings off his creeping fig to root and give away since the vine had done so well for him, covering a third of the north side of his house.

For years he tossed palm seeds in a damp area behind his house, and last spring he transplanted several of them to build an emerging palm garden behind his pond. With his driveway filled with *Trachycarpus* and *Sabal* seedlings ready to be planted out, he seemed ready to begin the next 93 years of his life. Mr. Manley's zeal for life shone in his blue eyes and in his attention to the small things in life: his plants, his friends, his dog. He does not sell his palm seedlings, preferring instead to share them with friends and visitors, anyone who shows an interest in the Princes of Plants.

"Come back when you can," Mr. Manley said. "I love to talk. And I especially love to talk about palms."

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