

Palms 101: The Travelling Slide Show

JOHN D. KENNEDY
3225 13th Street
Vero Beach, Florida 32960
USA
jkennedy@ircc.cc.fl.us

My employer (Indian River Community College, Fort Pierce, Florida) likes folks on the payroll to perform “community service.” This means that teachers and administrators are encouraged to go out into the four-county area that the public college serves to speak on various topics about which they have some knowledge. One faculty member, who has lived in Taiwan and who speaks Chinese, regularly talks to civic groups about Chinese Culture. Another, an anthropologist, speaks on the paranormal. But most topics are less exotic, often having to do with some aspect of health and wellness. Program chairmen/women of organizations are always on the lookout for likely speakers; the college’s speakers’ bureau is a handy resource.

When it occurred to me that maybe I too should perform some “community service,” I wondered what I should talk about. As a college English teacher with 30 years of experience, as an Irish(-American) man, as a Philadelphian, I had no doubt that I could talk for an hour (at least). But—on what? I had written two dissertations—one rejected, the other accepted—on the Victorian novelist, Anthony Trollope, and had read every one of his 47 novels. Was there an audience out there for Trollope? After all, I had given one talk to the local American Association of University Women (AAUW) group, some of whom had mistakenly thought I recommended for their delectation that 800-page, 1876 blockbuster novel, *The Prime Minister*. (An AAUW reading group had subsequently read and loved it!) I couldn’t really think that audiences were longing to hear about Trollope’s manifold virtues. I had also prepared and given another talk on “Reading for Pleasure,” though this topic inspired similar reservations.

Palms! That’s it! My wife, Ann, had joined the Palm Society—not yet the International Palm Society—in 1976. With the birth of our first child in 1979, her energies and attention were otherwise directed: I became the member of record, and

chief resident enthusiast. Now that I had my topic, what could I say? Um.

I spent several months cruising the literature, trying to get a grasp on basic botany. What are the growth points, what (exactly) is inside the trunk? Few concessions were made to the non-botanist; authors of many palm books were so eager to talk about leaves, inflorescences, fruit, species, that other information was skimpy. Corner’s *The Natural History of Palms* was most helpful. I soon realized that I didn’t have to provide a botany lecture, that I wouldn’t be addressing a class. But questions needed to be formulated and answered.

Who would be my audience? What did they need to know? How much information did I want to provide? The audience would likely be seasonal visitors—“snowbirds”—and transplants from the North, many of them retirees, to whom the climate, the plants, the gardening practices in Florida are totally foreign to their experience. Where else in the U.S, indeed, does someone plant a flower or vegetable garden in October, then watch it die in May or June? The audience would need to know how to select and to care for palms.

The information should be basic, straightforward, not confusing. A simple task to do all this, right? I would have to recommend palm species, but which ones? I went through the books, looked at lists, thought about what had succeeded for me, asked palm friends for suggestions. I narrowed species down into two categories: commonplace palms for identification, and less commonplace palms readily obtainable and relatively undemanding in care.

And, of course, there had to be a slide show. Lordy, I didn't *have* any slides. Bernie Peterson, nurseryman extraordinaire, of Cocoa, Florida, came to my rescue. He had assembled quite a few palm slides for a talk he had given to a short-lived botanical society that was to nurture the palms planted on the Florida Institute of Technology campus in Melbourne by Dent Smith (IPS founder) and Jerry Keuper (then FIT president, later IPS president). I could have the slides on long-term loan.

In January, 1993, I gave my first presentation at Heathcote Botanical Gardens in Fort Pierce, whose director, Lib Tobey, had recently installed a section with some nicely labeled specimen palms. She happily informed me that more than 30 people had signed up to attend. A significant number were nurserymen. My heart sank. What kinds of questions might they ask? Don't worry, I was told, they don't know all that much about palms. (This reassurance turned out to be fairly accurate, for general nurseries and garden centers here usually sell a narrow range of palms: queens, washingtonias, Chinese fans, "pineapple palms" [juvenile *Phoenix canariensis*], *Phoenix roebelenii*, occasionally paurotis, *Rhapis excelsa*, and, more recently, majesty palms.)

My first palm talk wasn't quite a disaster. I spent too much time trying to talk about palm botany and about the latitudes within which palms grow. Some slides that I had added to Bernie's were almost too dark to be identifiable. My handout was a skimpy list of palm species suitable for planting in the area. The nurserymen bombarded me with almost non-stop questions, most of which I was fortunately able to answer. I almost lost control of the situation and my talk went on far too long, about an hour and a half. I was so late in finishing that the planned visit to the palm walk was over too quickly, and took place in the deep shadows of late afternoon.

I staggered home to lick my wounds and to figure out how to make repairs. Every teacher knows that the first time he/she teaches a course is a learning experience, frequently in what not to do.

I streamlined the presentation to trim botany and geography. I got new and better slides. (If only all palms grew out in the open so that good pictures could be taken!) Eventually, I replaced about half of Bernie's slides with my own; some of his were on fascinating palm detail that was wasted on an audience just learning to tell a palm from a petunia. Viewers needed more generalized pictures.

I put together an expanded, more detailed 5-page handout that has been revised, tinkered with, and—hopefully—improved several times since. The first page was a list of palms by Latin and popular names, together with size, approximate cold-hardiness, and salt tolerance. The second page contained separate lists of native palms and of additional, less common exotic species obtainable from palm nurseries. Then, very **basic** general information about fertilizing, grooming (No, don't trim off green or even yellow leaves, watch out with the string trimmer, don't nail signs to palm trunks), what to do before and after a freeze, where to see palms (Fairchild, of course, and elsewhere).

All this came under the first-page title of "Suggested Palms for the Treasure Coast." The Treasure Coast is a tag given to three small counties on Florida's Atlantic coast: Indian River (my home county), St. Lucie, and Martin. Ships of the Spanish treasure fleet sank off this coast in the 18th century. The area is Zone 9B, the lower end of Central Florida, subject to occasional freezes not usually experienced in the balmier climes of West Palm Beach and Miami.

My major criterion for listed species was cold-hardiness; the Great Christmas Freeze of 1989, when the temperature fell to 18°F in my yard, was still horrifyingly fresh in my mind. The whole area, not just at my house, smelled for weeks of rotting vegetation. Not only palms, but also crotons, hibiscus, ixora, bougainvillea, and carissa browned as if blowtorched. A potential audience needed to know that palms seen in West Palm Beach (a mere hour's drive south) might be too tender to survive on the Treasure Coast. I reluctantly included queen palms and washingtonias on the list of suggested palms (for identification), but also pointed out some disadvantages in planting these; I was enthusiastic about *Bismarckia*, which grows well here.

I re-arranged slides to match the order of species on the handout. I didn't pretend to any knowledge of species outside my home area,

concentrating instead on palms with which I had had experience or which friends had grown.

In four years I've given my palm talk about a dozen times, often to 50 or more people, to retirees in a mobile home park and to garden clubs, most notable of which was on Jupiter Island, an enclave of old money where George Bush's mother—remember, she made him eat his broccoli?—lived her last years. I gave the presentation locally several times for the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods program of the state extension service, the purpose of which is to promote xeriscaping. I've also spoken to two chapters of the Florida Native Plant Society (of which I am a member), emphasizing native palms, as well as in a local library program, and on my home campus. Most of the time I've had seedlings to give away: "freebies" are hard to resist. Usually, these have been *Livistona saribus* and, sometimes, *Chamaedorea microspadix*. I also set out forms for membership in the Central Florida Palm and Cycad Society and forms for membership in the IPS. Chapter membership is an easier sell to beginners, being cheaper and less of a commitment.

I present myself before the audience as low-keyed, good-humored, self-deprecatory ("I'm not an

expert; the experts are botanists. I'm an English teacher, a hobbyist grower, who has learned a bit about palms by making real mistakes, unfortunately killing some palms in the process"). The trick with an audience of neophytes is to provide information without condescension or lecturing. Such a local presentation raises consciousness about palms; perhaps something similar to what I've been doing might work elsewhere. Yes, I have received a few calls at home (I don't give out my phone number but I am in the directory): I have directed callers to reference books and to nurseries.

I have been amused to discover that a Ph.D. in English Literature confers a credibility in my audience on what I'm telling them about palms. I could give them, if desired, an expert opinion on a verb or on a novel, but it is the magic and mystery of palms that draws them and that makes Florida distinguishable from New Jersey.

Editors' note: The handouts mentioned are available from the author who stresses that they were developed for local areas.

Instructions to Contributors

PALMS

Papers submitted for publication in PALMS must not have been published or submitted for publication elsewhere. Manuscripts will be reviewed by the editors and an outside reviewer. Manuscripts should be in English.

Authors should examine a recent copy of PALMS and follow the format established therein.

The hard-copy of the manuscript, including figures and captions, and the electronic copy should be sent to Dr. John Dransfield at the address below. Artwork may consist of line drawings, halftone or color photographs, or color illustrations. For review purposes, the author may submit clean photocopies of the artwork, and forward the original art upon acceptance of the manuscript. For color photographs, slides are preferable to prints. Vertical format is preferable to horizontal (landscape) format. The editors reserve the right to reproduce color photos as black-and-white halftones. Photographs must be clear, with good contrast and sharp focus.

Manuscript Preparation Checklist

Hard-copy

Manuscript title, author's full name and mailing address, and author's e-mail address, if available, on page 1.

Text should be typed, double-spaced, with page number in the upper right-hand corner.

Latin names should be underlined or written in Italics.

Literature Cited should follow the format established in PALMS vol. 44 (2000)

Figure captions, numbered consecutively, on a separate page.

continued on page 36