

Trithrinax: Trials and Tribulations

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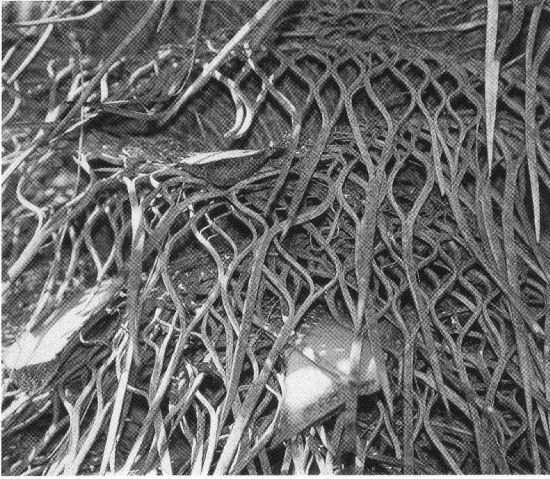
1. A particularly good silver-blue form of *Trithrinax campestris* in the wild.

Buenos Aires is a terrific city! Modern, cultured and exciting, it can stand alongside any European metropolis and hold up its head with pride! Forget "third world." Forget "South America." Here you can rub shoulders with the rich and famous in La Recoleta; you can watch polo played by some of the best horses and riders in the world. And you can dance the Tango! A thousand kilometres to the west, however, it's a different story. Here the landscape has hardly changed since the time of the dinosaurs.

With all this in mind, west is the direction in which we are heading this bright March morning. We have left the lovely sunlit city of Cordoba and are heading towards the Sierra de Cordoba mountain range that divides Argentina north to

south and runs parallel with the Andes, which separate Argentina from Chile. Raul is at the wheel of his Cherokee Jeep. He is a big, larger-than-life character with silver hair and moustache. He talks loudly and animatedly, waving his arms about





2. Close-up of the fierce armature formed by the leaf sheaths of *Trithrinax campestris*.

and not letting his less-than-perfect command of English get in the way. Sometimes, to stress a particular point, he breaks off into French, but with an accent that would scarcely be understood in Paris – testament to his years in the Ivory Coast of West Africa. He talks about the weather, Argentina's history, the Falklands/Malvinas conflict and a thousand and one other things, chain-smoking his way through a packet of Marlboro in a morning.

By the time the conversation has come around to palms, we are in the mountains themselves. At 800 m we are not particularly high, but high enough for the sun to be blotted out by mist and low cloud and for visibility to be reduced to a few meters. We crawl along, Raul peering into the gloom. The Caranday palm, he tells me, lighting up yet another cigarette and referring to *Trithrinax campestris*, grows all over the central north of Argentina, and there are hundreds of thousands of them. It has no natural enemies, only man and his machines. He goes on to explain that for the first time ever, this beautiful, tough, armed-and-dangerous palm is under threat from land clearance. This is what we have come to see. Huge areas are being bulldozed for agriculture, and palms are among the victims of the farmers' insatiable appetite for land. Raul is talking non-

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3 (top). Fire, deliberately set to aid land preparation for agriculture, sweeps through a population of *Trithrinax campestris*.

4(bottom). Charred trunks of *Trithrinax campestris* lie uprooted, victims of land clearance.

stop in his broken English, the car full of cigarette smoke. At that moment we break out of the mist, the sun is shining once again and from our high vantage point we can see for 80 km in every direction, across a huge flat plain where we will find our palms.

We stop in a village for a quick lunch: a huge plateful of meat, at least half a cow it seems (it's a brave man who declares himself a vegetarian in macho Argentina), and a foaming pint of Quilmes beer to wash it down, and soon we are on our way again. Before long we see our first *Caranday*. First one, then a hundred and one, then a thousand and one (Front Cover, Centerfold). Singles, doubles and in groups of up to four or five trunks, the tallest no less than 6 or 7 meters. Many are covered with the old leaves which form a skirt in the manner of *Washingtonia*. There are palms everywhere. We are surrounded by them, and stop to examine them more closely.

The fan leaves, surely the stiffest of any palm's, are a beautiful blue color, their tips sharp as needles (Fig. 1). There are up to 20 or 30 leaves per tree, and they radiate their spiny tips outwards in a sphere of stilettos. Where the old leaves have died, the armament is no less fierce, and the trunk is covered with an intricate network of interwoven spines and fibers, countless downward-pointing pairs of scissors (Fig. 2). The tree can scarcely be touched. Only on very old trees is the weaponry absent and the lower meter or so of trunk is bare.

At this time of the year, the palms are in flower, small yellow puffs of color, slightly fragrant and swarming with bees. Noisy parrots are landing in the trees, apparently nesting in the thick layers of old leaves. It's a magic landscape, prehistoric, as old, one feels, as time itself.

We walk back to the Jeep and continue down the same road. For many kilometers we see little but *Trithrinax*. It is baffling why this beautiful palm, so common in the wild, is so rare in cultivation. The land itself is rather flat, a huge flat plain that we had seen from the mountain pass. But now we are climbing a gentle rise and from the top, suddenly we get a different picture. To the left of the road, the scene is what we had become used to, palms as far as the eye can see. To the right however, there is not a palm to be seen, instead millions and millions of sunflowers are pointing at the sun and following its direction with their gaze as the day progresses. While the palms are wild and free, the sunflowers, genetically modified, are, symbolically perhaps, behind barbed wire, hung with placards promoting the chemicals and the manufacturers thereof that have been used to keep these vast numbers of plants weed free.



5. Refugee *Trithrinax campestris*, established in the Palm Centre, Ham, UK, none the worse for their ordeal.

Argentina is the largest producer of genetically-modified foods in the world.

Pretty as the flowers are, their very numbers are daunting (is it *us* their stares are following?), and we move on, constantly comparing the contrasting views to the right and left of this ruler-straight road. A couple of kilometers further on we come across farming in action. There is a smudge of smoke in the sky, rapidly becoming thicker as we approach and finally blotting out the sun. Here is the graveyard of the palms, felled by the hundred by huge bulldozers that care not for their ancient beauty but see them simply as obstacles in the path of progress. The armament that surely would have defeated the *Saltasaurus* that roamed these plains millions of years ago is nothing more than grist to the bulldozers' mill, and over they go, without sympathy or comment. Then they are unceremoniously piled into heaps, doused with diesel and torched, decades of growth reduced to ash and smoke, disappearing up into the evening sky as from a crematorium chimney (Figs. 3, 4).

Saddened and sobered, we drive back to the town where we had lunch, stopping at the same small hotel for the night. We have the other half of the

cow that we missed earlier, more Quilmes to wash the dust – and the smoke – away, and talk about our day. Raul became interested in the palms and their fate some years back. His business was in essential oils, and for him the palms were a sideline. Now, however, they are daily increasing in importance; they are, he readily admits, a lot more exciting than marigold and evening primrose. Now his business and indeed his mission in life is to get in before the bulldozers, dig up the palms, ferry them away to safety and, after a short period of recuperation, to export them by the container-load to Europe where they are beginning to grace the gardens of well-heeled palm enthusiasts.

They adapt remarkably well, tolerating the unavoidable damage to their roots, and what must be a terrible shock to the system. Remarkably they don't turn a hair and continue growing as though they were still back at home. We talk late into the night, Raul well into his third pack of cigarettes of the day, and Argentinean brandy having taken the place of beer.

A knock at my door tells me that morning has broken, and we must be on our way. *Jugo de naranja* and *café con leche* serve for breakfast, and we drive off into the cool sunrise, Cordoba-bound. It has been an eye-opener of a trip and a reminder that little is sacred in this world. My memories of the stately palms, falling like ninepins, will remain with me for a long time.

A month or so after I arrive back in the UK, a container-load of refugees arrives at my nursery. They look a little flustered, but after a week or two in the ground they are as good as new and seem to have suffered little from their ordeal. I do not pretend that I am saving them from extinction – there are far too many to be endangered as a species just yet, but 'rescued' certainly seems the appropriate word, at least for a few of the thousands of individuals which would otherwise have been incinerated on that distant plain (Fig. 5).

Centerfold (overleaf, pp. 78, 79).

Trithrinax campestris in great abundance in the wild.



