

Tropical Attitudes in Northern Latitudes

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"This is where our pond is going to be." The hole was the size of a basketball in our back yard. I paused, thinking, "Pond? He never said anything about a pond!" I dared not make a disparaging remark out loud and said, "OK." Little did I know at the time that we would be growing palm trees in Oregon. No plans were drawn. The ever-changing diagrams existed only in Gary's head.

We moved into a house which had been vacant for a year. The weeds were waist high. A holly tree dropped prickly leaves that defied decomposition. The pear tree was dead. An ugly shed loomed in the corner. An ivy-covered back fence and a fig tree were the only features that escaped our chain-saws and shovels.

The pond construction required many weekends to complete. Behind it we built an oversized planter box. Off to the nursery we went in search of the perfect plant, not sure at the time what the plant would be. We came home with large tub of thickly clumped *Chamaerops humilis*. "Tropical attitudes in northern latitudes" became our mission statement. It was the beginning of an obsession. As we located landscapes with palms around Portland, we altered our routes to the nurseries so we could see them.

The process of our landscaping was unwritten and unplanned, but yet it was methodical. Only one section at a time received our attention. In the beginning stages, our yard looked like a movie set. The one section of the yard that looked really nice ended abruptly, and the remainder of the yard was hard-packed dirt, debris, tools and materials. During the first year, one quarter of the yard got done.

The second year, I came home to find Gary with a shovel in hand once again. He was digging a trench. "This is where our sunroom is going to

be." Again I paused, thinking, "Sunroom? When did he ever say anything about a sunroom?" Within a week, he dug a big trench, carving out the outline of our sunroom.

We got our lawn chairs and set them in our sunroom-to-be and enjoyed the one quarter of our yard that looked nice. I looked along the back fence and noticed that Gary had placed the dirt from his trench in an even height to form a raised bed with a curved edge. Accident or design? I did not dare to ask. Then our focus shifted to the ugly shed. Suddenly, we couldn't stand that shed another day and tore it down.

It wasn't long before I found Gary with his shovel again, digging another hole. A big hole. "This is where our second pond is going to be." I thought, "Another pond? What about the sunroom?" I said, "I want a waterfall this time!" He muttered something under his breath and kept digging. The second pond was bigger and more difficult than the first. We ordered lots of rocks, moved each one at least twice. Then came the concrete, which I mixed, and Gary did the rest.

A kidney-shaped curve juttred into the pond from the back side. This time we knew before going to the nursery that a palm tree had to go in that spot. We located a *Trachycarpus fortunei* with two feet of trunk at a local nursery (Fig. 1). It was the first of many *Trachycarpus* to enter our landscape. Many different plants contributed to our little



1. The *Trachycarpus fortunei* (right) was in the ground five years at the time this photograph was taken. The bananas (left) were seasonal plants.

piece of the tropical look, but it was always the palms that drew the most comments from visitors.

We grew fourteen varieties of bamboo, ranging from timber bamboo to dwarf varieties. We also grew canna, elephant ears, ferns and bananas. The bananas and elephant ears, of course, were seasonal. Every fall we would bring the bulbs inside and replant in the spring, and we also grew citrus in containers which we brought inside for the winter. In addition, we had a pineapple guava which was grafted onto a hardy root stock, which we were able to grow outside. It was hardy to 5°F (-15°C) and produced delicious fruit.

Our expanding collection of hardy palms consisted mostly of *Trachycarpus fortunei* from local nurseries, supplemented with additional varieties purchased through mail order (*T. martianus*, *T. takil* and *T. wagnerianus*). We never had a problem with *Trachycarpus* surviving the winters. We had about a dozen *Chamaerops humilis* of various sizes which developed fungus problems after the severe winter of '95-96. We were too inexperienced at the time to recognize the problem. Had we known then what we know now, we could have saved them.

That same winter our *Phoenix dactylifera* and *Washingtonia robusta* succumbed. They were palms which we knew would be marginal, but Gary likes to push his zonal limits. To protect these palms

during the winter, we used corrugated sheets of plastic and formed them into a cylinder around each palm. On especially cold days, fabric around each palm. On especially cold days, fabric was draped over the top. This was sufficient for a mild winter, but the winter that killed them was unusually harsh for the region.

As our landscape developed, our privacy increased. The lush green foliage of the bamboo surrounded the perimeter of the yard, obscuring all view of neighboring houses (Fig 2). The cascading waterfall and the wind rustling through the bamboo diminished the sounds of the city. The high maintenance of skimming bamboo leaves out of the pond became a labor of pure enjoyment while we watched the fish swimming in the pond and the palm trees reflecting in the water. It was truly an urban oasis, and we dubbed our garden as the "Nor' Palm Palmetum."

Our garden began to capture the attention of passers-by. Sometimes we would look out the window and see people stopping their cars in the street and staring at our yard with their mouths open. The best fun of all was to watch the expressions of new visitors as they entered the back yard for the first time. Eyes would light up and exclamations would pour forth. The palm trees always sparked the most curiosity. One neighbor asked if they were real. Invariably we

would explain the cold tolerance of *Trachycarpus* and people would be amazed that palms would grow – and thrive – outdoors in Oregon (Fig 3).

We enjoy sharing our love of palm trees as much as we cherish the palms themselves. It was a

beacon that attracted people who were curious or who shared a common interest. New friendships were formed and our sense of community was strengthened. The garden itself is a unique form of expression, a living canvas that is ever-changing. The rewards are everlasting.

Fig. 2 (top). An earlier photograph of our original *Trachycarpus fortunei* taken the second year of landscaping. Fig 3 (bottom). In the fourth year, we raised the grade of the garden by 45 cm (18 in) with a truckload of mushroom compost. A gravel path leading to the back gate created a cold air drainage avenue, and a canopy of bamboo kept the back yard almost frost-free. From left to right in foreground: *Washingtonia robusta*, *Butia capitata* and *Chamaerops humilis*.

