

PALM LITERATURE

FEAST OF DATES. Daniel Potts. Trident Press, London, UK. 2003 ("2002"). ISBN 1-900724-69-6. £40.00. Hardcover, color dust jacket. Pp. 320.

FEAST OF DATES: THE DATE PALM IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES. Trident Press, London, UK. ISBN 1900724-67-7. £20.00. High definition DVD.

Those of us living where the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) is grown as an ornamental tend to forget that in some parts of the world, the palm is so much more. Daniel Potts' *Feast of Dates* is a sumptuous reminder of the pre-eminent role of the date palm in the culture, economy and history of the Arab world, especially in the United Arab Emirates. This large format (330 mm × 260 mm) book tells the story of the date palm with a reverence usually reserved for national heroes, and in a way, the date palm is just that, for without it, life in the harsh desert would be impossible. The date palm provides shade for crops, fodder for animals, fiber and timber for construction, food, medicine and enumerable products that make up the fabric of the lives of Emiratis, both ancient and modern.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part is the illustrated English text (pages 5–46), the middle part is an illustrated section (comprising 135 pages) with bilingual captions or short texts and the final part is the text repeated in Arabic. The text is well written and concise in its treatment of date palm botany, early archeological and cuneiform evidence and the date in the late pre-Islamic, Islamic, Medieval, pre-Modern and Modern eras. Potts, an archeologist, has drawn on wide range of sources, from agricultural treatises to the Koran, to tell his story. Of particular interest are the many translations of ancient writings and legends about the date. The sources document the fact that ancient date growers knew that date palms exist as either male or female and the pollen from the male is necessary in order for the female tree to bear fruit. Long before Greek scholars unraveled the details of gender expression in the plant kingdom, ancient growers devised a way to assist the natural pollination process by tying bundles of male flowers to the female inflorescence, a practice that persists to this day.

The illustrated section is especially browse-worthy. It includes both artistic renderings and

photographs, the latter some of the best representations of date palms ever captured on film. It includes photo essays on the biology of the date palm, fertilization and cultivation, harvesting, processing, and the date palm in art and poetry, traditional life and history. There are a few missteps among the photographs. At least one photograph is desperately out of focus, and two photos (among many) purporting to show the ornamental use of the date palm show, in fact, coconut palms. One 17th century illustration is surely that of *Areca catechu*. Despite these mistakes, the collection of over 300 photos is the great strength of this book and will give this book broad appeal.

The DVD, *Feast of Dates: The Date Palm in the United Arab Emirates*, is a 26-minute, award-winning documentary with narration in English or Arabic. I was able to play the DVD on both a Mac and pc computers, but my home DVD player was unable to read the disk, which is probably coded for the UK. The documentary is a paean to the date palm, covering virtually everything in the illustrated section of the book, with stirring pictures and computer graphics and an evocative sound track. Footage from rural UAE provides a fascinating glimpse into a world that is likely unfamiliar to most IPS members. I especially enjoyed seeing the segment on the traditional uses of date palm leaves for boat-building. That these traditions still exist in a country as thoroughly modern as the UAE is both gratifying and astonishing. I was also fascinated by the many creatures that feed on and live among the palms. The documentary shows that date palms support all manner of reptile, bird and mammal life. Even the DVD packaging is interesting, providing at-a-glance facts on the date palm and the UAE. I learned, for example, that 40 million date palms grow in the UAE, outnumbering humans ten to one. The cinematography and sound are excellent and the English narration clear and strong. A screening of this documentary would make an excellent short program for meetings of IPS chapters and affiliates.

For persons interested in one of the world's most important palms, a palm rocked in the cradle of civilization, a palm that has inspired ancient poets and modern scholars, this book and DVD are well worth having. They are a treat every bit as tasty and satisfying as the sweetest Medjool.

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