

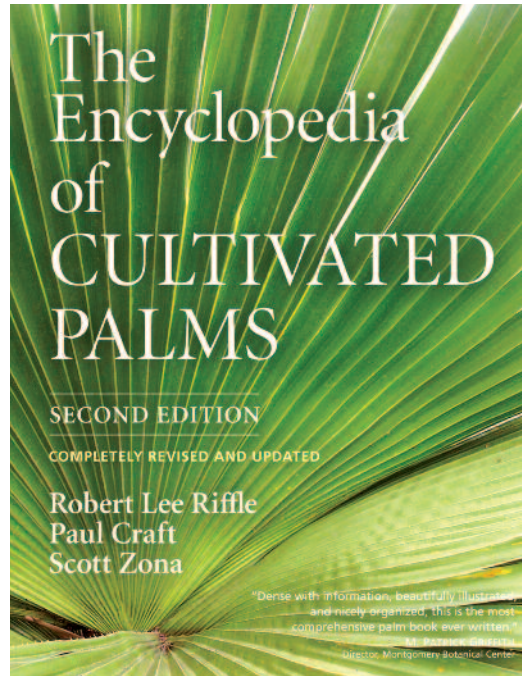
Palm Literature

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CULTIVATED PALMS, 2ND EDITION – R.L. Riffle, P. Craft & S. Zona. Timber Press, Portland & London. 2012. ISBN 1604692057. Price US\$59.95. Hardcover. 517 pages, 950 color plates.

Hot from Timber Press is the new edition of what is still the most comprehensive palm encyclopedia ever produced. As major illustrated references go, its price is surprisingly modest – \$59.95 direct from the publisher, and I hate to say how much cheaper from a well known mail-order bookseller.

It is likely that many if not most IPS members already possess the first (2003) edition by Robert Lee Riffle and Paul Craft and so will be asking themselves whether it is worth allocating both money and bookshelf space to the new one. This review will largely be an examination of how extensively the new edition has been updated.

The text has been botanically checked and edited and new entries mainly written by professional palm taxonomist and IPS Director Scott Zona with much additional input by Paul Craft as well. Scott told me he tried to adapt to Robert Lee Riffle's enthusiastic writing style but found it hard to match. Riffle, who died in 2006, was a much loved gardening personality and wordsmith who put his soul (and much hard work) into converting dry botanical descriptions into more readable form while retaining a good measure of precision. In writing about plants grown for ornament it is difficult to find a balance between objective description and aesthetic evaluation, and Riffle could not resist the temptation to gush here and there. One example that caught my eye in the first edition was the last paragraph of the *Deckenia nobilis* entry beginning "This magnificence is one of the most beautiful palm species ..." – slightly toned down in the new edition to "This magnificent and beautiful species ..." Of course, it has been the vast palm knowledge and experience of Paul Craft as grower, collector, explorer and photographer, that has underpinned both editions.



As far as content goes, the new edition is significantly enlarged, with 119 species additional to the earlier 830, and 7 new genus entries. As to size, it is actually slightly smaller, identical in format but about 10 percent thinner. There is some cost-cutting evident, with cloth covers and dust jacket replaced by glossy board covers though still appearing quite durable and strongly bound. Internally, paper appears to be slightly thinner but still of good quality. The most significant reduction is in pages of text, shrunk from 304 to 274, achieved despite the addition of many entries by a more condensed typeface and marginally smaller point size. A random check of carried-over entries reveals only minor tightening of the wording. I did not go as far as counting words, but the small reductions must be somewhat offset by the insertion of metric measurements in parentheses, a welcome addition for readers from outside that last stronghold of the imperial system, the United States.

Pages of color plates, in contrast, have increased from 219 to 240, with the numbered plates (mostly four images per page) increasing from 929 to 950. As these numbers suggest

(and also considering the additional species entries), the average number of plates per species is lower. A quick scan revealed many have been cut from three to two or two to one. It also revealed that a great many have been replaced by different photos of the species, often with such a dubious improvement it was hard to fathom the motive for replacement. But it is good to see that many species that had no illustration in the first edition now have one. Scanning through names beginning A–D I found 86 such gaps plugged. For the 74 new species entries in A–D, I found 52 are illustrated and 19 are not (plus three in the first edition without text entries) – thus a total of 138 newly illustrated palms in the first third of the book alone!

Still on the subject of the color plates, they are of adequate quality but rather mixed aesthetic appeal. Most are square-on shots of the whole palm with only a minority showing flowers or fruit, the effect being page after page of different shades of green – a frequent accusation of those gardeners who are not turned on by palms! The new and replacement photos have hardly lessened the effect. But the feat of bringing together such a vast and comprehensive collection of palm photos is nonetheless admirable.

There are some noteworthy additions in the new book, for example the exciting new genus *Tahina* discovered in Madagascar and the newly recognized genera *Dransfieldia*, *Leucothrinax*, *Solfia* and *Saribus*. It was *Saribus* that was the big surprise for me, on learning it had very recently been split out of *Livistona* on cladistic grounds and included the popular *L. rotundifolia*. At species level the big winners,

in terms of genera with the most new species entries, are *Dypsis*, more than doubled from 30 to 61, *Pinanga* from 25 to 38, and the old favorite *Chamaedorea*, from 30 to 43. Some of the newly treated palms are real rainforest gems, e.g. *Chamaedorea tenerrima*, *Dypsis beentjei* and *D. coriacea*, *Pinanga gracilis* and *Wettinia hirsuta*, or for lovers of majestic specimens to plant in open spaces, *Beccariophoenix alfredii* and *Orania ravaka*. A significant trend that emerges from the new entries, and indeed evident even in the first edition, is the flow into collections of exciting palm discoveries out of Madagascar over the last decade or two, a flow that shows little sign of slowing.

To end with the obligatory finding of minor faults, I noted the misspelling of *Bactris grayumii* (“grayumi”), *Coccothrinax hioramii* (“hiorami”) and *Rhapis laosensis* (“laosensis” under plate). And *Chamaerops humilis* has var. *argentata* in the text but var. *argentea* under the plate (the latter is correct). Apart from these, spelling and attention to other points of orthography appear to be of a very high standard.

If you need to be up with all the palms currently being grown (and many hardly yet in cultivation), or you are a new recruit to palm collecting, or simply that your copy of the first edition is falling apart by now, then this book is a must-buy. Yes, there is a lot of information available online, but there is so much more in the book that you would be hard put to find on the internet.

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Photo Feature

Hydriastele dransfieldii occurs on three of the islands in Cenderawasih Bay (Biak, Supiori and Numfor) adjacent to New Guinea’s Bird’s Head Peninsula. Here it is seen growing in a narrow band of primary forest that persists on a limestone ridge running parallel to the coast of southern Biak. As the photographs on the following two pages show, it grows abundantly in these conditions, rooting into the bare limestone without apparent need for

well-developed soils. The species was introduced to cultivation in the 1990s, but was formally described in 2000 (Baker et al. 2000. Palms 44: 175–181) in the genus *Siphokentia*, which has since been reduced to synonymy with *Hydriastele*.

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