

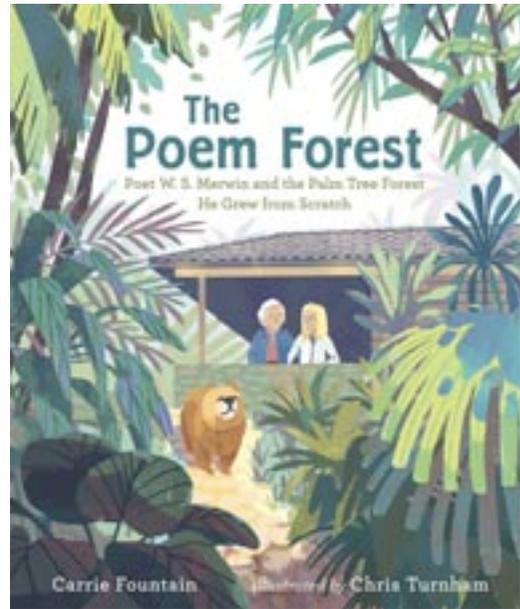
PALM LITERATURE

THE POEM FOREST: POET W.S. MERWIN AND THE PALM TREE FOREST HE GREW FROM SCRATCH – Carrie Fountain. Illustrated by Chris Turnham. 2022. Candlewick Press. ISBN 978-1536211269. Hardcover. 32 pp. US\$18.99.

W.S. Merwin (1927–2019) was one of the most acclaimed and prolific poets in the United States whose work appeared frequently in the *New Yorker* and *Atlantic Monthly* as well as in dozens of his own collections of poetry, translations and prose. In addition to serving as the nation's Poet Laureate in 2010 and 2011, Merwin won two Pulitzer Prize for volumes published nearly 40 years apart, the first in 1971 and the second in 2009. In the 1970s Merwin moved to Maui where he put down roots on a slice of an abandoned pineapple plantation in a windswept valley on the island's sparsely populated north shore. There he continued to write and began learning how to reclaim the played-out land by first building up the soil and then planting what would become a forest of palms. Fountain's children's book tells the story of how Merwin came to Maui and, despite spending much of his life in cities and initially knowing nothing about palms, was able to grow a towering forest with palms from all over the world and change the course of neglect in that small valley forever.

Although written for children, the book explores some decidedly grown-up themes like Merwin's desire – almost an overpowering compulsion – to put life back into the earth and the need to preserve that life after his death. Fountain uses her skills as an accomplished and award-winning poet to distill complicated human emotions and desires into just a few carefully chosen words – in this case, words that can be read and understood by children.

One of the recurring themes in the book is Merwin's wistful yearning for wild places he rarely experienced living in an urban setting. Fountain writes that towns and cities are "where the wild parts had been straightened out and turned into roads and lawns and driveways." Describing the abandoned and abused farmland that Merwin came to own,



Fountain writes that "He'd found a straightened-out place longing to grow wild."

Fountain is able to make complex concepts accessible to young readers with help from Turnham's dreamy illustrations. Anyone who has seen a young child's brow furrowed in concentration, intensely studying the pictures of a storybook as it is being read, will understand just how important illustrations can be to fill in the gaps of understanding. Turnham's illustrations do more than just depict what is written, they take you deeper into the story. My favorite illustration shows Merwin sitting on a park bench; the text reads "He had a hunch he'd find his wilderness in Hawaii." The bench looks over a reflecting pool, but instead of mirroring the skyline of the city in the background, the reflection shows Merwin standing among palm trees under a tropical sun.

This is not, however, a "Baby's First Book of Palms," although I hope someone will write that too one day. There are no scientific names mentioned, nor can you identify the species of palms from the pictures. (*Licuala*-like leaves do seem to be particularly abundant perhaps due to their striking outlines). I recommend this book to my friends in the International Palm Society who want to share with the young people in their lives their love and desire to save the wild places where palms grow.

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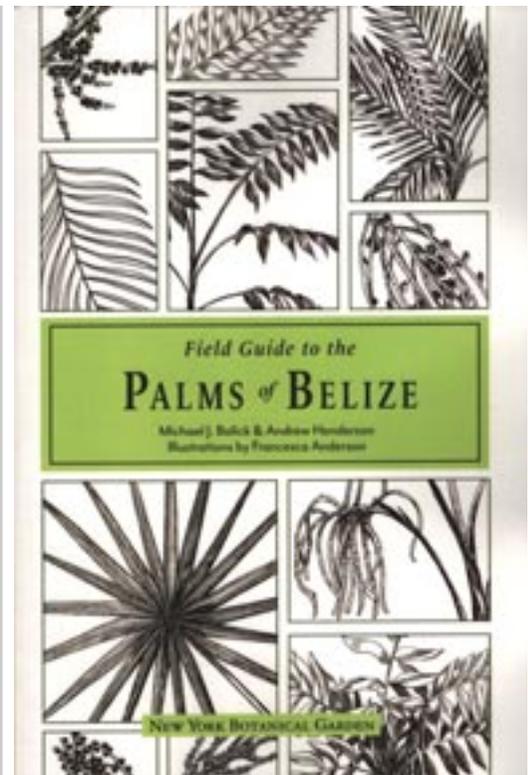
FIELD GUIDE TO THE PALMS OF BELIZE – Michael J. Balick and Andrew Henderson. Illustrations by Francesca Anderson. 2022. New York Botanical Garden. ISBN 979-8-795-33043-3. 153 pp., line drawings & halftone photographs. Hardcover US\$29.95; softcover US\$14.95.

Belize is a small country on the southeastern side of the Yucatan Peninsula, facing the Caribbean Sea. It borders Mexico to the north and Guatemala to the west and south. Its topography is low along the coast and in the northern half of the country, while the southern half has low mountains. The highest peak is Doyle's Delight at 1124 m (3688 ft), which is only about a fourth as high as neighboring Guatemala's highest peak. Lacking the area and topographic diversity of its larger neighbors, Belize has a correspondingly smaller palm flora, although it is home to many species familiar to growers and gardeners around the world.

The book is a guide to the 25 genera and 39 species that occur in the country. Most of the genera have only one or two species in Belize; *Chamaedorea* stands out with ten species. As you might expect, the palm flora is shared with southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and other parts of Central America. *Schippia concolor* is the nearest thing to an endemic species, although the authors speculate that it may also occur in Guatemala.

Each species treatment provides information on the common name(s), identifying characteristics for use in the field, range and habitat, as well as traditional uses. The latter are the specialty of Dr. Balick, who has been cataloging the ethnobotanical knowledge of Belize since 1987. The text is clear and concise, providing a simple précis for each taxon. A key to the genera is provided. For the few genera that have more than one species, keys to the species are also provided. To its credit, the book generally avoids botanical jargon, making it accessible to a wide audience.

The line drawings by Francesca Anderson are equally clear and accessible and make a fine



complement to the text. Each plate includes a drawing of the habit, along with useful studies of distinguishing features or other details. For four species lacking Anderson drawings, halftone photographs – or in one case, a reproduced engraving – are provided. The illustrations are placed either on the page with the taxon description or on the facing page, so there is no flipping through the book searching for the illustrations. The back of the book has a list of voucher specimens, literature cited and, of course, an index. Perhaps the only thing missing from this book are in-country distribution maps.

This field guide will be immensely helpful to anyone new to the palms of this part of the Yucatan Peninsula. It would be perfect to take along on a vacation to Belize that would include visits to national parks or Mayan ruins. At \$14.95 for the paperback edition, this book is affordable and easily tucked into a carry-on bag. The Kindle edition, at under \$10, is even more portable.

SCOTT ZONA
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