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New Era Ushered in at the Retreat

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The Retreat, 11 acres of Bahamian woodland east of Nassau, is a special garden that International Palm Society members have come to know in bits and pieces over the last 33 years. An article and photos have appeared in *Principes* (1:48, 1957 and 11:139, 1967), and photos of, and references to palms on the property are found in McCurrach's *Palms of the World*. For over half a century, with love, ingenuity, determination, and good humor, Arthur and Margaret (Wumpsie) Langlois personally collected and assembled an impressive group of palms, many of which have become the best specimens of their kind in North America. But in the 1970's, illness turned the couple's attention away from their hobby, and the garden began to decline. When Wumpsie Langlois died in 1985, eight years after Arthur, a fascinating era ended.

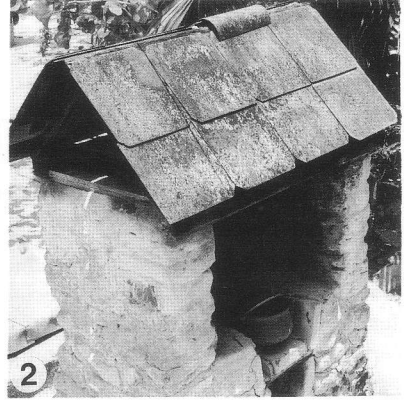
But this article does not focus on loss. On the contrary, it bears good news: The Retreat is on the way back. In 1985 the property became the headquarters of The Bahamas National Trust, and Prince Philip of Great Britain traveled to Nassau for ceremonies to dedicate the change in governance (Fig. 7). However, to fully appreciate the value of what is happening now and what is being preserved, it is perhaps best to review a bit of The Retreat's past.

When Arthur and Wumpsie Langlois bought a homestead in 1925, shortly before their marriage, the property already had a long history. As far back as the era of the American Revolution, it was part of a land grant known as The Retreat Estate, most likely settled by Loyalists who came to the Bahamas from the mainland. The

wall that surrounds the property dates from about 1780, and two rock-lined wells from the period are still readily identifiable, though no longer in use. The mostly-wooden house is actually a composite of several pods, the oldest a formal dining room (Fig. 1) dating from the 1860's, when the property belonged to the British Colonial Secretary. However, just behind the house is part of an outdoor kitchen (Fig. 2) thought to have been built 25 or 30 years earlier. Atop the house is a red shingled roof whose restoration earlier this decade was funded in part by a donation from the South Florida Chapter of The Palm Society.

Margaret Langlois was a second-generation Bahamian, but apparently had no special interest in palms before meeting Arthur, a native of the British Channel Islands, who had probably become enchanted with the plants as a young man in England. The couple bought The Retreat after deeming it suitable for growing palms, and gradually a hobby became a consuming passion. Certainly the greatest early boost to their collecting zeal came in 1934, when Arthur, a civil servant, was transferred to palm-rich Trinidad to help install a fresh-water system. Many attractive species were collected and crated up for shipment to Nassau when the Trinidadian assignment ended.

The Langlois' first of many trips exclusively to collect and photograph palms was an expedition to British Honduras (Belize) in 1941. Arthur and Wumpsie not only attained their objective—finding *Reinhardtia latisecta*—but also succeeded in introducing *Schippia concolor* into cultivation. One of the *Schippia* seedlings that



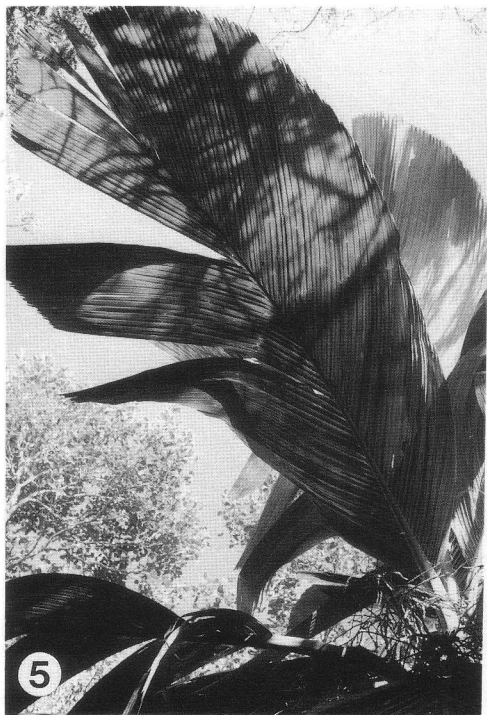
1. Formal dining room, oldest pod of the Langlois house, is separated from living quarters by wood-screened breezeway/breakfast room at left in background. 2. Outdoor stove, circa 1835, stands complete with well-used kettle at rear of dining room. Behind it to the left is cover to one of the cisterns installed by the Langloises to capture rainfall from roof of the main house. 3. Beautiful interfoliar white flowers constitute one of the attractive features of *Schippia concolor*, a slow-growing member of the subtribe Thrinacinae (tribe Corypheeae, sub-family Coryphoideae). 4. Young *Synechanthus* occupies one of smallest solution holes in coppice. Surrounding leaf litter proves invaluable in enriching soil.

they brought back (Fig. 3) is now 18 feet tall and thriving in the coppice, or woods, even though it had no trunk until 1963 and Wumpsie once called it the slowest growing of any palm in the garden.

Other rare palms came to the Langloises through their friendship with Dr. David Fairchild. In fact, following Fairchild's famed Cheng Ho expedition to the Far East in 1940, they were the only non-institutional recipients—aside from sponsor Ann Archbold—of seed collected during the six-month trip. One of the seed acquisitions,

Areca 208, an orange-crownshafted beauty, became known for a time as *Areca langloisiana*, though later research established that it had already been described and named *Areca vestiaria*. But Shakespeare's pronouncement on roses is no less accurate for fine palms, and the Langlois' *Areca vestiaria* now stands as the finest example of its kind in North America.

Following their success in British Honduras, Wumpsie and Arthur undertook another quarter century of collecting trips with characteristic enthusiasm and more



5. Rare *Pelagodoxa henryana*, abaxial surfaces backlit by sun, is native to one island in Marquesas group 700 miles north of Tahiti. Spent inflorescence is visible in lower right corner of photo. 6. Shaft of sunlight reaches upper level of Green Hell to illuminate imposing teeth of *Myrialepis paradoxa*, a rattan widespread in Southeast Asia.

than a little bit of daring. To finance their travels, they often rented their home to winter vacationers and stayed in the garage apartment on their property. Few individuals today realize the significant niche that they occupied in broadening both hobbyists' and scientists' awareness of palms at mid-century. For aside from augmenting their collection, the Langloises increased the general store of palm knowledge—at a time when there was no Palm Society—by forwarding many specimens to Dr. Max Burret in Berlin and Drs. Liberty Hyde Bailey and Hal Moore at Cornell for addition to their respective collections and herbaria. And as their own palms reached fruiting age, the Langloises provided a source of seed to Fairchild Tropical Garden and The Palm Society Seed Bank. In a

conscious departure from the typical practice of hobbyists, they sought to emphasize genera, rather than species, in their collecting. The Retreat, at its peak, was home to about 95 genera, or nearly half those known to botanists.

None of the foregoing information should leave the impression that the hard work ended once plants or seeds were brought to The Retreat. While New Providence Island is blessed with temperatures that seldom dip below 50° F (10° C), its moderate 46.4-inch (1,179-mm) average annual rainfall is rapidly lost from the thin soil overlying dense limestone caprock. The result is an inhospitable environment for many palms, and the problem is exacerbated by great variability in rainfall from year to year. Early plantings in the scant



7. Monument dedicated by Prince Philip occupies position opposite front of house. Behind lower wall are leaves of *Heterospatha elata*, which has become naturalized in coppice.

soil on the front third of The Retreat grounds brought mostly disappointment, especially with the more demanding palms.

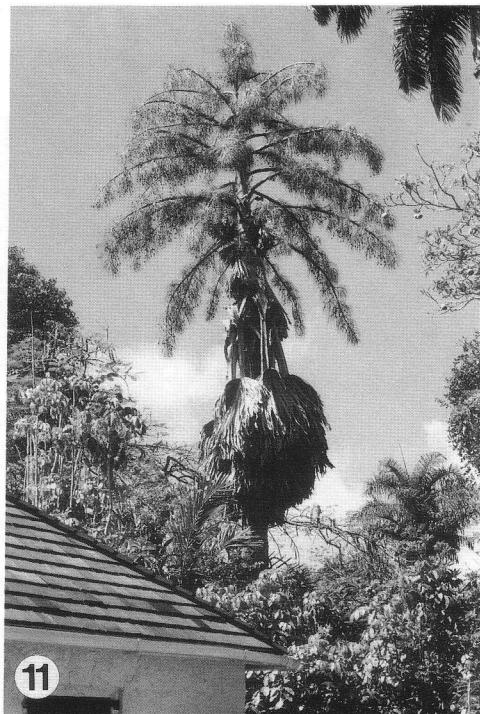
What made the Langlois garden a success was the fortuitous existence on the back part of the property of sinkholes, depressions etched slowly by the action of rainwater dissolving patches of softer limestone. The sinks, also known as solution holes, provided a healthier environment for exotic rain forest palms by catching rainfall and leaf litter, and the Langloises also had loads of soil brought in to improve them. To augment the meager dry-season rainfall, Arthur eventually installed a fairly extensive system of irrigation pipes around the grounds to tap cisterns constructed next to the house.

The Langloises utilized all sorts of sinkholes. Some accommodate a single small plant, such as a *Synechanthus* (Fig. 4) that apparently was one of Wumpsie's last

additions to the garden. But others, much deeper or longer, were chosen to hold a favorite palm, such as *Pelagodoxa henryana* (Fig. 5), or a group of several species. Nevertheless, despite the apparent desirability of any sinkhole, the Langloises were very particular in their choices of which to use. If, after thorough examination, they felt that roots of nearby trees would compete with the exotic palms, they would leave the hole unplanted and look for something more suitable. The most special hole, an erstwhile chicken coop excavated by Arthur, boasts a shallow pool and even a paradoxical name, Green Hell. The descent into the depths by narrow stone steps reveals ferns, heliconias, and more palms, but only the devilishly-armed and fittingly-named rattan, *Myrialepis paradoxa* (syn. *M. scortechinii*) (Fig. 6), appears capable of inflicting everlasting agony. Green Hell, intended to simulate Amazonian forest, later



8. Pavilion dedicated to Godfrey Higgs occupies area between main house, visible in background, and garage apartment. 9. Stanley Kiem administers foliar spray to palms bordering front porch of home. Virtually all the rare palms on the property received a trace element application the same day.



10. Surrounded by a flowering red ginger, *Alpinia purpurata*, *Phoenicophorium borsigianum*, from Seychelles, resides in sinkhole apparently enlarged to a rectangular shape. The palm is probably a replacement in the same spot for the specimen pictured on p. 238 of *Palms of the World*. 11. *Corypha umbraculifera*, entering final stages of fruiting in June 1987, still bears 2,000 or more maturing round seeds. Once spent, inflorescence would collapse against trunk. A nearby second Talipot palm from same seed batch has grown much more slowly and is not even visible in photo.

served as prototype for the Rare Plant House at Fairchild Tropical Garden.

Another aspect of the Langlois' predilection for palms is the systematic accumulation by Wumpsie of information about them. One group of documents consists of meticulous notes tracing the source and development of every palm introduced to The Retreat. To raise a diversity of genera was no simple task; the dearth of reference material meant that palm culture was a self-taught subject for the Langloises. Wumpsie's notes clearly reflect the philosophy undergirding their approach to palm growing: "Try try again," she wrote in November 1943. "This truly applied to the *Bentinckia*. And today, we can say we

have succeeded; the three plants we have out are green, healthy and vigorous growers. They thrill me every time I look at them because they stand for more than a plant established. They are a reward for perseverance, for dogged persistency, and for 'holding out to the last man'."

A second set of documents, now in the possession of Fairchild Tropical Garden, is of broader scope. It consists of 20 folders jammed with information intended to provide the substance of a great tome which Arthur hoped to write. Wumpsie evidently maintained a sharp eye for photos showing identifiable palms, wherever they might appear; hence the folders are replete with items clipped from *National Geographic*



12. Seeds sown in spring 1987 from Langlois *Corypha* had produced many healthy seedlings at Palm Society nursery at Dade County Metrozoo by October. Not unexpectedly, the key to good germination was consistently warm temperatures day and night.

and other periodicals. Arthur himself was a deft photographer, and the materials include his photos not only of palms encountered in native habitats in the course of the Langlois' travels, but also pictures of photos they found while examining records at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. And present throughout the documents are typewritten commentaries by Wumpsie in which she pulled together the fragments of knowledge acquired from here and there. The comments are always informative and sometimes brimming with praise for a favorite palm. Of *Syagrus amara* (syn. *Rhynchoceros amara*), for example, Wumpsie proclaimed, "The cautious gardener would be careful not to plant it in the close vicinity of any coconut tree as its brilliant greenness would make one think that his poor old coconut was ill."

As time passed, the likelihood of getting the great tome into print diminished, and

the Langloises decided to produce a smaller work, *Supplement to Palms of the World*. Even after Arthur's stroke in 1974 diverted attention from their palm collection, the couple continued to assemble the *Supplement*, completing the draft shortly before Arthur's death in 1977.

With advancing years, Wumpsie took steps to insure the preservation of the palm collection and insulate The Retreat from development pressures. In 1977 she sold the land to Bahamian businessman Jack Hayward, who then deeded it to The Bahamas National Trust. Trust member Oris Russell, then Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, was a catalyst in effecting the transaction. Modeled on legislation in Great Britain, The Trust is a non-governmental entity created in 1959 by the Bahamian Parliament to preserve historic properties and manage marine and terrestrial wildlife in the islands. It now



13. *Borassodendron machadonis*, staminate inflorescence with exerted flowers.

administers over 238,000 acres of property. Shortly after transfer of the estate, The Retreat Council passed a resolution declaring the property inalienable, thereby guaranteeing preservation of the palm garden in perpetuity. The Retreat Garden Committee was later created to facilitate that goal.

But the sale did not end Wumpsie's influence on The Retreat. Perhaps stung by an indelicate remark about the condition of some of the collection, she set out to make her entire homestead more orderly, even if that meant occasionally negotiating a rickety ladder to patch holes in the roof of the house. In late 1983 she granted the South Florida Chapter of The Palm Society permission for a visit in March 1984. The thought that so many people wanted to see The Retreat invigorated Wumpsie, and despite a recent serious health setback, she led a tour of the coppice with great relish,

navigating roots and rocks with the aplomb that only six decades of familiarity can produce.

Upon Margaret Langlois' death in July 1985, the latest chapter in the history of The Retreat began to take shape. Most significantly, The Bahamas National Trust moved its headquarters from rented space in downtown Nassau to the garage apartment on Retreat grounds. On October 18, 1985, Prince Philip, Royal Patron of The Trust, dedicated a monument (Fig. 7) marking the opening of The Retreat to the public. Since that time, significant changes have taken place on the property. Though a termite-ridden portion of the home has been removed, a large pavilion (Fig. 8) just behind the house was constructed and dedicated in May of 1987 to the memory of The Hon. Godfrey Higgs, a founding member and the first president of The Trust. An active group of guides has been organized and trained by Linda Thompson to lead informative tours of the garden. Also, plans are afoot to construct an additional cistern to assuage the chronic water shortage. And an illustrious deed awaits any local group which might wish to increase color on the grounds by renovating a vine arbor situated on a cleared area in the middle of the coppice.

The coppice itself has seen some steady changes, coordinated by a special palm subcommittee led until 1989 by Sara Bardenmeier and presently by Barbara Pyfrom. In May of 1986, Stanley Kiem, former superintendent of Fairchild Tropical Garden and longtime friend of the Langloises, donated his time to examine the coppice and devise a comprehensive plan for preserving the palm collection without exceeding monetary resources. Among the first accomplishments under Kiem's recommendations was the institution in the fall of 1986 of a fertilization program for the palms. Until that time, none had been fed with anything stronger than manure. In addition, a groundskeeper hired with Trust funds has made noticeable progress in



14. Margaret and Arthur Langlois. Photo by Don Evans.

eliminating the *Sansevieria* that had spread throughout the property, hindering views.

In June of 1987, Kiem returned to The Retreat. In less than three days, he and the author prepared metal identification tags and holders for most of the palms on the property, and there was time to affix many of them with concrete to positions near each plant. (Eventually a number of the more significant palms will be identified by durable anodized aluminum markers to be donated by the South Florida Chapter and inscribed with legends prepared by The Retreat Garden Committee.)

Using equipment lent by a local landscaping company, Kiem was able to reach almost every palm to administer the first foliar trace element application that any had ever received (Fig. 9). He also utilized colored plastic ribbons to differentiate the palms according to moisture requirements, so that rainfall collected in the cisterns could be distributed judiciously. In addition,

he began mapping planted holes in order to improve record keeping and simplify identification.

Finally, Kiem took soil cores from several planted holes around the grounds for analysis. The cores contained a heavy clay-like material that seemed to indicate that whatever moisture got into the holes would not quickly percolate out. Subsequent testing revealed a soil devoid of phosphorus and potassium, but fairly high in nitrogen. The nitrogen and water-retention levels may explain the apparent vigor of many of the palms despite years of less than optimum attention. In fact, even the seemingly hostile front portion of The Retreat has proven remarkably kind to many palms. For instance, *Heterospathe elata* and *Ptychosperma elegans* have become naturalized in the area, demonstrating the ability to thrive in the rock without the need for special planting holes.

These days a trip through the coppice

reveals all sorts of palm delights at nearly every turn: *Phoenicophorium borsigianum* (Fig. 10), displaying leaves untattered by Caribbean winds; a tiny *Areca*, contrasting green leaflets with striking deep red petioles; *Borassodendron machadonis* (Fig. 13), bearing spectacular orange inflorescences dotted with yellow flowers. Because Margaret and Arthur Langlois (Fig. 14) were private people, The Retreat perhaps has always been less well known locally than in the world of palm fanciers. Consequently, the greater is the credit due those Bahamians whose judgment and foresight have assured the preservation of the treasure that is The Retreat. It is, to be sure, no vast reserve, but in a world

where forests shrink hourly and plants and animals disappear with frightful speed and lamentable finality, what The Retreat symbolizes transcends mere physical measurements. The value and significance of what has been achieved by the Langloises and their successors as stewards of the land are probably best defined in remarks made by Prince Philip at the dedication of the garden:

"I think every community needs someone to be its conscience about what is going to happen in the future. . . . You can't solve global problems, but you can solve your local problems, and if you do it well, it will be an example to people in the rest of the world."

NOTE

Corypha Seed Project

In September 1985 a *Corypha umbraculifera* planted at The Retreat from seed collected in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1940 by friends of the Langloises began flowering. The South Florida Chapter's 1987 project to distribute seeds from this specimen (Fig. 11) proved successful beyond expectations. With shipment of the last quantity of ripe seed in October 1987, the Chapter had distributed over 5,900 seeds, and viability proved to be very good (Fig. 12). The project raised over \$1,200 for The Retreat Garden Committee of The Bahamas National Trust to use for upkeep of the property.

LETTERS

Dear Dr. Uhl:

On page 154 of *Principes* (July 1989) the palms in the photograph of the Fulton House in Rockport are referred to as *Sabal mexicana*. They are *Washingtonia filifera*.

In my place across the road from the Fulton House are some large *Sabal mexicana* including one more than fifty feet tall which may be the largest of this variety in Texas.

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Eds' note: for more on this see p. 51.

PALM BRIEF

Coconuts Arrive

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP)—This winter playground of the wealthy is famous for its towering palm trees, but it once was a barren offshore sand spot with no vegetation.

Then, in 1878, a Spanish ship loaded with coconuts and wine went aground and broke up. The coconuts that floated ashore took root, sprouted and grew into palm trees that transformed the landscape.

Attracted by the palms, climate and isolated beaches, a few wealthy Northern families built winter homes here at the turn of the century. Now, Palm Beach has luxury hotels, expensive shops and restaurants and still attracts the rich and famous. —From Hawaii Tribune Herald article sent in by KEN BANKS, Pahoia, HI.