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Talk about New World Thrinacinae

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Talk about New World what? THRY-NAY-SIN-EYE, Latin for "Thrinax type". *Genera Palmarum* (Uhl and Dransfield 1987) says this is a subtribe of the Coryphoid fan palms, most of which are New World palms, and three of which are native to south Florida, and all of which are well worth knowing, growing, and promoting.

Every self-respecting palm lover should want to know the obvious differences between *Thrinax* and *Coccothrinax*, and have knowledge of their handsome relatives. Without becoming technical or resorting to what few scientific words they know or use with confidence, the authors want to tell you what they think they know about the new world Thrinacinae, starting with the three south Florida natives.

Thrinax and *Coccothrinax* are what the authors wish to be: elegant but often informal, with sometimes well wrapped, slender trunks, comfortable in high winds and in harsh, hot environments, moderately cold tolerant and highly salt tolerant, slender but in time quite tall (some to forty feet or more). *Thrinax* has divided leaf bases; *Coccothrinax* does not. If these provide an attractive criss-cross pattern to *Thrinax* above their trunks, *Coccothrinax* has, at least in its younger years, a fabric wrapping which holds both complete, fresh and older broken off leaf bases. *Thrinax* has white fruit looking like wax, and *Coccothrinax* dark black or purplish fruit, looking, one might say, like dehydrated blueberries from an Egyptian tomb.

Thrinax radiata

Of the four *Thrinax* which exist in the Caribbean basin, *T. radiata*, sometimes called the "green key thatch palm", is the most common in Florida, and the only one found on the Florida mainland. In Everglades Park, on the shores of shallow bays inland from Florida Bay and difficult to reach by car or boat, there are crowded colonies of *T. radiata*. Because of its relaxed leaf tips it has an informal, even tousled look compared to most Thrinacinae. Although slow-growing (20 feet in 20 years?), it is tolerant of beach sand or of

alkaline rocky soil, requiring little care and little protection from wind. Its fronds are green on both faces, a bright yellow-orange-green. Grown in the sun, its many fronds are tightly grouped.

The authors recall, years ago, that there were in the Florida keys many emergent *T. radiata*, countless undersized key palms, growing on rock, holding small pom pom heads high above the lower scrub, looking like small explosions. The better the soil, the larger the crown, but in shade, like most of its relatives, the palm attenuates incredibly, displaying a languorous reaching for space.

Thrinax morrisii

(Of mo-riss-ee-eye, morris-ee-eye, or morris-eye, the authors prefer the one which leaves Morris's name undamaged and pronounces "ii" as "eye".)

South Florida's second native *Thrinax* is a more formal, even slower growing stiff-stemmed, less hairy brother to *T. radiata*, sometimes called "silver key thatch palm". Its handsome fans are blue green on top and silver beneath, colors which automatically relate well even to the ersatz turquoise of typical swimming pools. Like *T. radiata*, *T. morrisii* needs little care in calcareous soils; to fertilizers it responds so well, however, that its trunk sometimes swells and its crown becomes much larger than its wild-growing counterpart. Along with most *Coccothrinax*, *T. morrisii* is even more drought resistant than *T. radiata*.

Coccothrinax argentata

Among the slowest growing of the world's slow-growing palms, this delicate dwarf "silver palm" from the pine scrubs is as endangered as its habitat. Although there are countless *C. argentata* in south Dade County, it is worth a trip to the lower Florida Keys to see taller ones (to 15 feet) growing among the *Thrinax* and *Serenoa repens*. The palm's exceptional character results from dark green leaf tops, intensely silver undersides, and



1. *Thrinax excelsa* at Fairchild Tropical Garden. Photograph by L. Pancoast.

very relaxed and narrow radial leaflets, the ultimate informal palmate elegance.

C. argentata was the subject of last year's poster produced by Fairchild Tropical Garden and the South Florida Chapter of the International Palm Society, the first print of twenty-one to be made from splendid palm watercolors painted in the 1950's by artist Lee Adams. Both painting and poster capture *C. argentata*'s curvaceous grace which is almost ethereal.

Sadly, the palm transplants with great difficulty. With prices reflecting its speed of growth, it is available commercially and at occasional palm shows. It wants a sunny, well drained alkaline location, free from distracting plant competition, where its refinements can in time unfold.

Rhapidophyllum hystrix

Although the endangered needle palm grows well in south Florida, it is native to north Florida and to other southeastern states where it grows in sandy, moist woods and swamps. The round pinwheels of its divided fans are pleasing to the eye, but few observers other than those with an

emotional identity with *R. hystrix* would classify this slow-growing, suckering, prickly clumper as elegant.

The Other Thrinax

Two splendid *Thrinax* with relaxed leaflets come to us from Jamaica, *T. parviflora* and *T. excelsa* (Fig. 1). *T. parviflora* is larger than *T. radiata*, cruder in all parts, with some cultivars possessing remarkably curly leaflets. *T. excelsa*, formerly called *T. rex*, possesses much larger fronds and is regrettably scarce, perhaps due to cold sensitivity.

The Other Coccothrinax

Genera Palmarum claims that there are forty-nine species in the Caribbean Basin, with thirty-four of these in Cuba. *Coccothrinax miraguama*, long a collector's item for its rigid fans covering 360 degrees or sometimes more, the more deeply folded of which have the look of Elizabethan collars, is a Cuban palm which varies from one end of the seven-hundred-mile-long island to the other. As if those formally held round fans aren't enough,

the trunk fabric is three-layered and long-lasting. Although increasingly available, the demand for *C. miraguama* will always overreach the supply.

Coccothrinax crinita, also from Cuba, is easily identified by its light brown, wavy trunk hair, merely typical *Coccothrinax* fabric with split ends. While the "old man" hair gets more attention, the crisp, rigid, refined crown is just as worthy of note. Almost as slow-growing as *C. argentata*, and fussy about nutrients, in enough time it can grow to twenty feet or more before losing its Solomon hair.

The fastest growing of the *Coccothrinax*, winners of the turtle race, may be two that are often confused with each other, *C. dussiana* from Guadalupe and *C. alta* from Puerto Rico, both of which have large fronds with drooping leaflets. Some people say that *C. proctorii*, a fine but scarce palm from Cuba, is faster yet. *C. dussiana*, however, wins any contest of flashing the undersides of its fans in the wind.

Other New World Thrinacinae

The first three genera addressed below, while splendid, are not horticulturally challenging or hard to find in south Florida collections. These should be used far more often than they are. The three genera more difficult to find and to grow will be approached last.

Cryosophila

Whether one chooses to accentuate the "soph" or the "phi", or neither, this is a genus of perhaps ten species, any one of which is well worth growing. Their divided fans are superb, far more lovable than the root spines some of them sport on their trunks. The fans are held in the crown in such a way that they can be individually appreciated. Slightly larger, if less tall than *Thrinax*, they are softer and less windworthy. They prefer to begin life in shady conditions on the damp side, but will mature in shade or full sun. They range from Mexico to Columbia. *Genera Palmarum* says they need study, as apparently do a surprising number of the world's most desirable palms.

Four species are listed here as growing in the Miami area, although there may be more. *C. warscewiczii* from Panama was represented at Fairchild Tropical Garden by a forty foot specimen, impressive with its shaggy fronds, but it was lost to Hurricane Andrew and is now being replaced by a smaller one. *C. albida* is thought to be

smaller, and is much in demand for intensely silver leaf undersides. *C. guagara*, a more recent import, is growing well, showing promise. The *Cryosophila* "to die for" is *C. nana*, most elegant of an elegant family, with perfectly round fronds of narrow leaflets divided to the hastula. While other *Cryosophila* accustomed to rain forest existence are happier with ample rainfall, *C. nana* can be grown drier because it is found, or perhaps can only now be found, in dry ravines on the west central coast of Mexico. As if perfection of form were not enough, its sweet, shiny fruits are "suitable for wine making". Regrettably, *C. nana* is scarce in south Florida.

Schippia concolor

A species distinction of this Central American monotype, the only species in its genus, is said to be that it stays small (twelve feet overall) when grown in the sun. That may or may not be true; *Palms of the World* (McCurrah 1960) describes it as reaching 33 feet "in the woods". *Schippia* carries its 190 degree *Thrinax*-like fronds on long petioles, giving its crown a nicely open character; one can look into the crown. After years of slow but steady performance in calcareous soil, having built a stocky grey trunk, the palm produces a flossy white inflorescence which yields, within a very short time, to showy white fruit sometimes as large as ping pong balls, and visible from a considerable distance. The authors are hoping to learn what color inspired the name "concolor".

(M. Burret described *Schippia concolor* in 1883. The original description read: "Lamina utrinque fere concolor . . ." which translates: Lamina (or blade) nearly the same color on both sides.—Eds.)

Zombia antillarum

Causing amazement in first-time observers, intricately woven, successive collars of rigid spines are prized by collectors who grow *Zombia*. It has been so popular with collectors for many years that it is well represented in Miami collections, but along with other splendid palms is apparently almost extinct in its native Haiti. Among its handsome multi-trunks, smallish white waxy seeds can be found, but care is advised in collecting these from among the spines. Another monotype, it is rumored to have consorted with certain *Coccothrinax* to cause taxonomic frustration among those who are quite sure they know the names of everything. Some *Zombia* lovers prefer their *Zom-*



2. *Chelyocarpus ulei*. Watercolor by L. Pancoast.



3. Containerized *Itaya amicum* at Fairchild Tropical Garden. Photograph by L. Pancoast.

bia grown in the shade because a more open habit permits a better view of the trunks. The authors hope that this palm does not need to lose its name to *Coccothrinax*, as did poor *Rhyticocos* to *Syagrus*, through a corporate merger prescribed by science.

Trithrinax

Of about five species in cold-hardy *Trithrinax*, the authors have only met two: *T. acanthocoma* and *T. campestris*. Both sport woolly trunks worthy of a musk ox, but with protruding spines. They are slow-growing. Their alert, rigid crowns are exceedingly handsome, and they are tolerant of high pH's. But they are easily put off by too much water and so must be banished to Santa Barbara to join a list of dry-growing palms Floridians must envy, which have those ever-so-dry California roots. They are sometimes seen in south Florida, especially after long dry periods, belonging to the few growers who can force themselves not to water certain palms they grow. Four species, says *Gen-*

era Palmarum, grow in dry areas of South America from Bolivia to Brazil, and one, *T. biflabellata*, grows in sandy marshes (in Brazil?) along river banks! Someone must expose this one to Florida's rains and avid waterers.

Chelyocarpus

Five medium-sized, sometimes clumping palms which grow at lower elevations of the Amazon and in Columbia's Choco, suggesting much moisture, low pH's, and high iron, are *C. longibracteata*, which the authors suspect has long bracts, *C. chuco*, with divisions in its palmate leaves which cause these to look like hands, seen and desired by a South Florida Chapter of IPS/Fairchild Tropical Garden excursion to Bolivia which found it not in seed, and a dark horse, *C. dianeurus* which occurs in Pacific coastal Colombia. Another palm "to die for", however, is *C. ulei* (Fig. 2). With widely divided palmate pinwheels strongly serrated on their tips, *C. ulei* creates a startling silhouette

against the sky (see *Supplement to Palms of the World* (McCurrach 1960), page 42), remarkably Licual-esque. *Chelyocarpus* is described (along with dry *Trithrinax*) as one of the most primitive (least specialized) of the palms. Primitive or not, south Florida is fortunate indeed if *C. ulei* can be coaxed into its future. The fourth species, *C. repens*, from Amazonian Peru, was described in *Principes* by Francis Kahn and Kember Mejia, where one can read about it (32: 69, 1988).

***Itaya amicum* (Fig. 3)**

A monotype from only two known locations in the western Amazon "seasonal rain forests at low elevations", few Floridians have seen its handsome, *Licuala*-like, *Chelyocarpus*-like leaves, but many know of it from an article in *Principes*.

Fairchild Garden has two *Itaya* which survived the sudden brightness after hurricane Andrew in the "Rare Plant House" which it intends to use in the plant exhibit house to be built on the same site. Probably the best specimen in Florida grows in Peter Whelan's Key West garden. Whelan believes the palm may be overly tender to cold weather to survive north of the Keys.

Itaya's long and slender petioles are held onto the trunk by leaf-bases elegantly split. In regard to these leaf bases, Bob Read is said to have pronounced the following ponderable, "*Chelyocarpus* and *Cryosophila* are to *Itaya* as *Coccothrinax* and *Zombia* are to *Thrinax*." Now it should all come clear.

PALM RESEARCH, 1993 (See *Principes* 38(3): 169)

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