

## Goin' Back To Miami Edition

### Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden

“a purely swell idea”

#### Part 1

Remarkably, Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden (FTBG) was conceived in a bathtub! Indeed, while taking his morning bath, Colonel Robert Montgomery dreamt of a tropical garden to honor the legendary plant explorer Dr. David Fairchild. The Colonel then wrote his friend Marjory Stoneman Douglas, and she replied that the idea for a garden was, in her opinion, “a purely swell idea.” In 1936, just 40 years after Julia Tuttle founded Miami (then with a total population of only 300 residents), Fairchild Tropical Garden was incorporated.

Immediately palms were at the forefront. In 1939 Dr. Fairchild was selected by the organizers of the World's Fair to curate an educational exhibition concerning palms. Dr. Fairchild wrote: “such an exhibit would allow visitors to understand the beauty

Straightaway upon entering the 83-acre garden, an impressively sized *Tahina spectabilis* (passenger tram providing scale).



and importance of palms, beyond being house plants” and added that the display would be “dramatically beautiful” (letter to Robert Montgomery, April 8, 1939).

Less than two decades later in 1955, Dent Smith, a highly focused palm hobbyist in Daytona Beach, envisioned a Palm Society. And Fairchild played an instrumental role in the creation of the International Palm Society! Mr. Smith was naturally drawn to the (already) famed Fairchild Garden for guidance.

The Palm Society was officially founded by Mr. Smith in 1956, and the first meeting was held at the FTG (before the B) on April 17, 1956. As would be expected, several prominent FTG people were pioneer members including legendary names (and their eponymous palms) such as Col. Robert Montgomery (*Veitchia montgomeryana*), IPS Secretary Lucita Wait (*Ptychosperma waitianum*) and Mrs. David Fairchild. [Editor’s note: *Attalea fairchildensis* is named for the garden (-ensis is for places, not a person)]. The last surviving inaugural member, Stanley Kiem, passed away in 2020.

Fairchild scientists have served continuously on the Board of Directors since the IPS’ inception. Furthermore, Dr. John Popenoe (Fairchild’s Director for 28 years) was the President of the IPS from 1970 to 1972. Additionally journalist Nixon Smiley, an Interim Director at Fairchild from 1953 to 1961, was a strong ally of the IPS and a close friend of Dent Smith.



The grand lawn framed by *Bismarckia nobilis*.

FTBG is revered by the IPS, so it's not surprising that four of our first five biennials were held there. Additionally a sixth Biennial meeting was held there in November of 1992 (less than three months after Hurricane Andrew struck Miami), and the seventh was in 2014. Further the Dent Smith Archives are housed at FTBG and administered by Dr. Brett Jestrow, a Fairchild scientist.

The Palm Society became "International" in 1984 (recognizing the worldwide membership and scope of the organization) and will soon celebrate its 70th anniversary (while the FTBG, now a civic treasure in So. Florida, will turn ninety). With tremendous gratitude toward FTBG, the IPS has now continuously published a peer review journal *Palms* (including many articles from FTBG botanists), funded research grants totaling more than a half-million dollars, and created an annual conservation fundraiser named "Save the Species." With nearly 2000 members worldwide and an endowment approaching one million dollars, the IPS is poised to make a big impact. And this all began thanks to Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden.

Personally, my affection for the Fairchild Tropical Garden (as it was then known, with "Botanic" added in 2004) is the result of multiple balmy visits with my beloved grandmother in the 1970s. Clearly this was the source of my unbridled affection for palms which continues to this day.

This grove of *Carpoxylon macrospermum*, a monotypic genus from the assuredly palmy islands of Vanuatu, caught my eye. Admittedly, it was the finding of ripe fruits scattered in the grass beneath, that really grabbed our attention.



Of course the FTBG's palm assemblage is wide and diverse. It would be well beyond the scope of this pictorial essay to fully account for their holdings. So I will focus on a few specimens from the geographically adjacent Caribbean islands, and specifically their very strong palm collections from Cuba and Hispaniola.

**Cuban Palms:**

A classic viewpoint at the FTBG, *Copernicia baileyana* with its stout columnar concrete-colored trunks.



*Colpothrinax wrightii*, the Cuban barrel palm, trunk close-up. IPS founder Dent Smith commented after visiting this species in habitat: "the swelling is so pronounced as to make the tree one of nature's strangest freaks" (The Palm Society Bulletin #4, April 1956, page 6). Andrew Street, IPS Director and Curator of Palms at the neighboring Montgomery Botanical Center writes: "They [*C. wrightii*] are super uncommon as they just don't grow well. The only other one I have seen was in Loxahatchee-Palm Beach County. Both are on the edge of a lake. It is hypothesized that's the only way to grow this palm out of habitat. Many have tried to grow it, it's just not easy to say the least."



*Copernicia rigida*, with its characteristic cuneiform leaf blade, lends a Dr. Suess look to this portion of the garden.



*Hemithrinax ekmaniana* from the limestone magotes of Cuba.

Only about 300 specimens occur in nature; the FTBG has seven, all grown from seed in the Fairchild nursery. These are over a decade old and known for their slow growth. Easily recognizable, "with their compact globose crowns, silver blue leaves and thin trunks at maturity- reminiscent of lollipops" (The Tropical Garden volume 73, number one, 2018).

## Hispaniolan palms:

*Attalea crassipatha* from Haiti. This species well isolated from other members of the genus, which are typically found on the continental mainland from Mexico through South America. This palm is critically endangered.



A quite mature (read: old) specimen of the Haitian palm *Copernicia ekmanii*, seldom seen in cultivation.



The swollen trunk of *Coccothrinax spissa*, endemic to the Dominican Republic. This was an “unforgettable sight” during the 2006 IPS Biennial and graced the cover of that year’s December issue of *Palms*. IPS director and benefactor Dr. Laz Priegues for scale.





## The Conservatory

I would be remiss not to enter the historic Conservatory, originally known as the Rare Plant House, with its rare and beautifully grown über-tropical palms. One of the highlights of my many years of visiting the FTBG was this enormous clump of *Salacca magnifica*. Regrettably, this palm outgrew the confines of the greenhouse, mandating its removal. I am including these photos from 2015 (all other photographs in this article are recent) as a tacit memorial to an outstanding specimen.



*Salacca magnifica*



*Sommieria leucophylla*, a rare understory palm from New Guinea, is exceedingly uncommon in cultivation in Miami. Closely related to *Pelagodoxa henryana*, it has similar fruits (though smaller) with the same warty appearance.



Our lodestar: The double coconut, *Lodoicea maldivica*. I received personal communication that this plant has grown so well that it was recently necessary to remove panes of plexiglass to allow it to peak out from above the greenhouse.

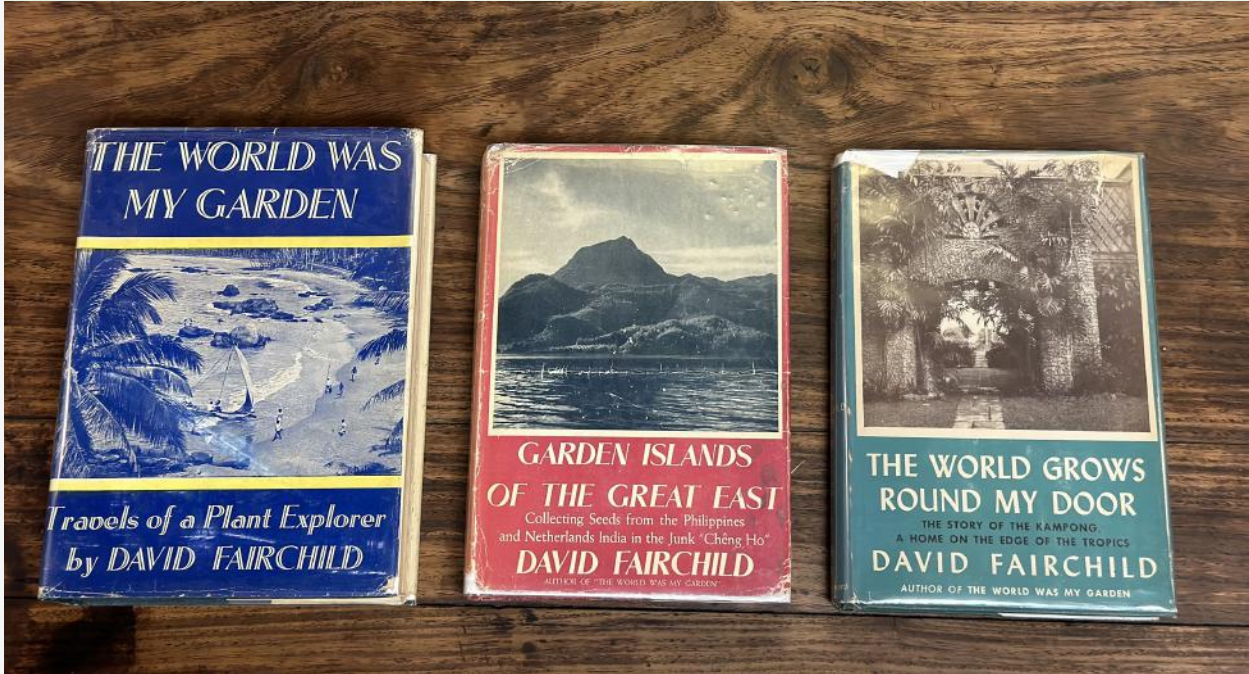
In closing, the FTBG money shot:





After a memorable morning of palm viewing, especially plants endemic to Cuba, we continued the island theme for lunch. A perfect Cuban sandwich on a perfect day in Miami.

Three of the four books written by Dr. David Fairchild, all first editions warmly inscribed by Dr. Fairchild.



To Mrs Finley H. Lloyd  
One of the first members  
of The Fairchild Tropical  
Garden

Sincerely yours  
David Fairchild

GARDEN ISLANDS  
OF THE GREAT EAST

"The Kampong"  
Coconut Grove  
March 19<sup>th</sup> 1944

**THE  
WORLD GROWS  
ROUND MY DOOR**

To Dr. José Cuatrecasas  
Up from Cali, Colombia, bonded  
for Chicago University  
A souvenir of days spent  
together in Bogotá in 1941

Very sincerely yours  
David Fairchild

The Kampong.  
May 19, 1947  
Coconut Grove  
Florida.

## Sociedade Brasileira de Palmeiras (SBP)

Introducing a new regional palm society: Sociedade Brasileira de Palmeiras (SBP)!

Received from Director Julie Cleaver-Malzoni:

“We now have a Brazilian Palm Society - Sociedade Brasileira de Palmeiras (SBP). The society was formally founded last November, during a 3-day event at Inhotim Botanic Garden near Belo Horizonte. Key speakers at the event included Ricardo Pimenta, Harri Lorenzi, Jan Anders Lindstrom from Nong Nooch Botanical Garden, and IPS members such as Carlos Alex, José Pompeo Jr., and Dr. Larry Noblick (virtually). The inaugural SBP president is Juliano Bonin, also an IPS member. He attended the 2022 Biennial in Hawaii. Juliano is the botanical curator at Inhotim.”



## Palm Related Forums, part 1: PALMTALK

### PALMTALK

PalmTalk is the popular internet-based forum supported by the International Palm Society.

IPS member and PalmTalk moderator Dean Ouer explains:

“PalmTalk, in various forms, has been around since 2000. The present version, operating non-stop since 2005, is a modern forum format consisting of almost 20,000 users, over one million posts, and a quarter million photos. Unlike FaceBook, there is a powerful Search feature. And searching for any particular palm, person, nursery, weather, growing zone, etc. will always bring results. Ask a question, and you will always receive multiple answers and/or suggestions.

In its pages you will find entertainment, education, and friends that share the same passion as you. You will meet people to visit during your travels, and those who will wish to visit you. You can share and gain knowledge from them, and many will become good friends.”

In 2020 Palm Talk, in conjunction with International Palm Society, held the first annual Save the Species fundraiser. The focus was the preservation of the (then) recently discovered *Tahina spectabilis*, a critically endangered palm in NW Madagascar.

The story actually began on Palmtalk in 2006:

<https://www.palmtalk.org/forum/topic/62135-the-topic-that-started-everything-a-must-read/#comment-917065>

## Upcoming Travel with the IPS

Pre-Tour:  
September 21, 2024 (Saturday)  
Capacity 44  
**sold-out**  
waiting list at palms.org

Main Biennial:  
September 22, 2024 (Sunday)  
through September 30, 2024 (Monday)  
Capacity 150  
**sold-out**  
waiting list at palms.org

Post-Tour  
October 1, 2024 (Tuesday) through  
October 5, 2024 (Saturday)  
Capacity 15  
Registration pending



## New Benefactors

We are very pleased to welcome new Benefactors:

Cindy Adair  
Anonymous  
Anonymous  
Jeffry Brusseau  
Mark Cox  
Tobias Spanner  
Tracy Strahl

The International Palm Society now boasts 33 benefactors! Please consider becoming one today:

[Membership Levels](#)

## Parting Shot

Perhaps the largest *Copernicia cowellii* in North America. Photo by Dr. Laz Priegues, Miami. This is a small, slow-growing species that begins flowering when trunkless and eventually forms an above-ground trunk 3 to 10 feet tall. It is Critically Endangered in its native Cuba.

