THE INTERNATIONAL PALM SOCIETY
Conserve. Learn. Grow.

Feb. 2025 **NEWSLETTER**

The February Edition

Poleward Coconuts and Palm Trees in California Fires

Marc Schuyler stands under a coconut palm in Funchal, Madeira, Portugal.

Which Coconut Is Farthest from the Equator?

The coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*) is the most famous of species in the palm family. While many other palms are more important in their native regions or where grown on a mass scale (one thinks of the African oil palm, *Elaeis guineensis*) and in those cases possibly even better known than coconuts, most of the world is more familiar with the coconut than with any other kind of palm. (The date palm [*Phoenix dactylifera*] is surely a runner-up.) Among International Palm Society members, the coconut is often a favorite species, or at least a gateway species to the love of palms.

Newsletter reader Marc Schuyler contributes the first submission in a series we're kicking off: Which coconut palm is growing farthest from the equator? Marc visited Madeira, the Portuguese island group in the North Atlantic at latitude 32 degrees north, and found 20 to 30 specimens on the island, some with maturing coconuts. He offers the photo above to prove it. Marc says, "A local reported to me that they are unusual there and do not grow coconuts, but I found this to be false."

Much conversation on Palm Talk has addressed the question of finding the northernmost or southernmost coconut, and several threads have delved into climate records to try to define the constraints of growing this flagship species. "What I found particularly striking during my recent travels," says Marc, "is that, of three similar, marine-dominated-climate island chains (the Canaries, Madeira and the Azores, with similar year-round temperatures and obvious differences being annual light and moisture patterns), I found *Cocos nucifera* quite plentiful and widely distributed in the Canaries (though clearly the result of relatively recent cultivation), much rarer and isolated (though still healthy) in Madeira, and absolutely no specimens in the Azores."

Palm plantings at a hotel on Sal, Cape Verde

These three island groups are part of Macaronesia. If you have visited or live in the fourth Macaronesian archipelago, the tropical Cape Verde Islands, send me palm pictures and your impressions from there and I'll try to include them in a future newsletter.

The next installment in our series brings observations by Kyle Wicomb of coconuts on the west coast of North America beyond the tropics.

January Fires in Southern California: Palms Spotlighted

Devastating fires hit the Los Angeles area in early January, drawing attention to the unusually dry winter conditions and extreme winds that made the fires more likely. They destroyed nearly 20,000 structures and wiped out entire towns and districts. Our sympathies are with Palm Society members who have been affected and their communities, as well as with people in the entire region.

Many news photos have shown palms in the landscape adjacent to fires, as well as palms (mostly *Washingtonia robusta*) destroyed by fire, a powerful symbol of the region's losses.

Queen palms (*Syagrus romanzoffiana*) seen in the Palisades Fire in Los Angeles on January 8, 2025

Another angle news organizations have turned on Southern California palms is their role in propagating fires. The dead leaves remaining on Mexican fan palms, for example, can act as firebrands when they catch fire and take flight on extreme winds, setting structures and brush ablaze. Frustrating to those of us who love palms and have some understanding of the ecology of fire in California is the myth that some reporters recount that palms pose a unique risk in fires.

Mexican fan palms (*Washingtonia robusta*) at United States Marine Corps Camp Pendleton, California, burn in a wildfire on October 8, 2008.

The natural landscape of most of California is adapted to periodic wildfires, which can easily cross into neighborhoods at the edge of the state's fire-adapted scrub and forest ecosystems, especially during extreme wind and dryness. Few to no palms are propagating fire in those scrublands and forests, and the firebrands flying through neighborhoods at their edge include the full array of flammable elements in structures as well as from the plants in neighborhood landscapes, from pine needles to palm fronds. In the absence of palms, these fires would play out in roughly the same way.

One article discussing the topic of managing suburban and urban landscapes and architecture to minimize fire risk in the wake of the fires appeared under the headline, "No More Palm Trees, and Six Other Ways L.A. Can Protect Itself From Wildfires." The reporter wrote, "Boulder County, Colo., has learned some big lessons from recent fires."

> "Pine needles and debris around a house quickly spread flames. Juniper bushes explode in fire. In fact, county officials call junipers 'gasoline plants.'"
> Then the article turned to palms: "Los Angeles has its own problem plant: palms. Many palm species, once they catch fire, are very hard to put out. In fire-prone areas, they should be avoided entirely, according to the Los Angeles County fire department."

One can forgive a beat reporter without a background in fire ecology, firefighting, or horticulture when they pass along information from a fire department that glosses over the many kinds of palms grown in Southern California, only a few of which are efficient fire-spreaders. Anyone with gardening knowledge walking around Los Angeles (yes, some of us do walk in L.A.!) will see at least as many of Boulder's scourge, junipers, as of fire-prone palms in gardens and public landscapes. Singling out junipers in Boulder and palms in Los Angeles as fire risks is a reporter's shortcut. Hollywood's famously palmy image clouds the reporter's analytic and evidence-gathering skills against seeing the bigger picture. Meanwhile, city planners and arborists in Southern California counsel against planting palms in favor of species like the Canary Island pine (Pinus canariensis), one of the most fire-adapted of pine species, evinced by its ability, nearly unique among pines, to resprout from epicormic buds after burning. Just like many of California's trees and shrubs (including the state's native palm, Washingtonia filifera, and its renowned redwood trees), it's evolved to burn. No need to hold palms responsible for the catastrophes people have just experienced in California.

Photo from around 1898–1901 of Palm Canyon, Palm Springs, California, USA, showing recently burned *Washingtonia filifera* palms

Save the Species Campaign

Good news just in from Dr. Andy Hurwitz, president of the International Palm Society:

> "I am thrilled to report that the IPS annual conservation initiative, Save the Species, achieved our donation goal for the fifth consecutive year! We collected over $25,000 in donations which will provide ample funding to repatriate *Basselinia vestita* in habitat in New Caledonia. I wish to thank each and every one of our donors for allowing us the privilege to once again meet our goal."

Basselinia Superheroes (up to $5000)

Faith Bishock
Glenn Franklin

Basselinia Heroes ($1000 and over)

Jeff Brusseau
Greg Hammond
Hawaii Island Palm Society
Andy Hurwitz
Leland Lai
Boyd Marts

Chapter News

News from Local Palm Society Chapters

We're sharing news from chapters affiliated with the International Palm Society around the world. Please send your news to editor Jason Dewees at loulu.fan@gmail.com / loulufan@gmail.com.

Central Florida, USA

The Central Florida Palm and Cycad Society is slated to host a booth at the Plantae–palooza Garden Festival at Hollis Gardens in Lakeland, Florida, USA. Enjoy the tropical landscaping, buy some plants, and enjoy some good food!

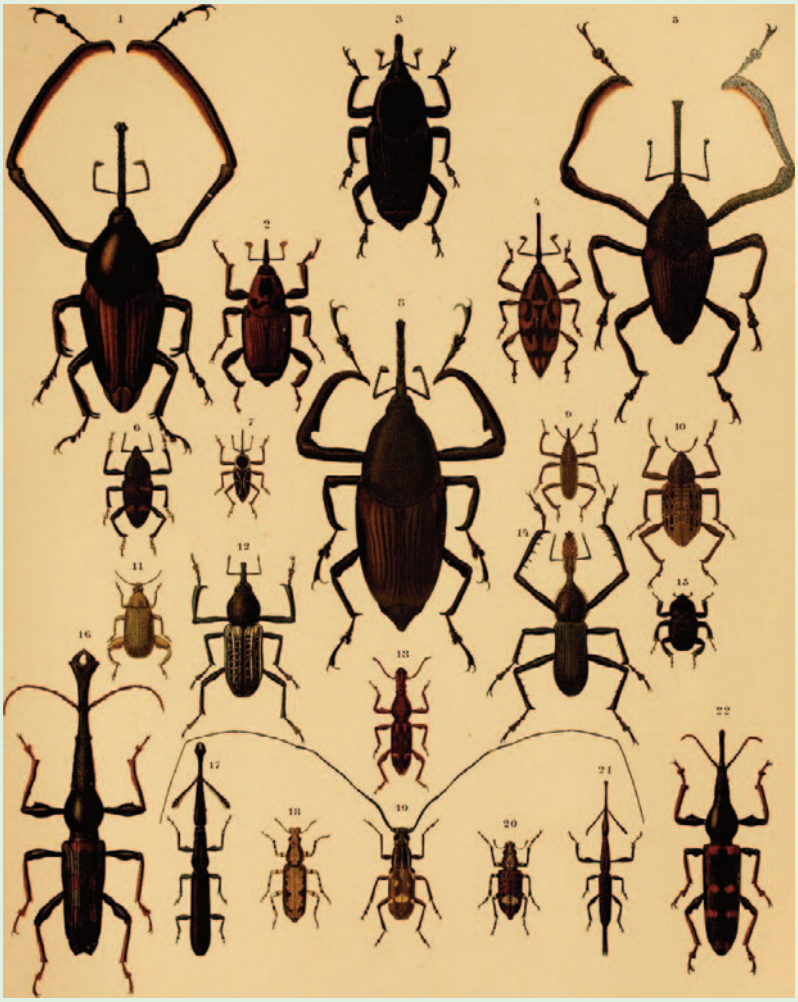
Date: Saturday, February 22nd, 2025
Time: 9:00AM to 2:30PM
Location: Hollis Gardens, 702 E Orange St., Lakeland, FL 33801
CFPACS Events: https://cfpacs.com/org/events/
More information will be posted as it becomes available. Look for up-to-date info on Palmtalk.org. The chapter was at the sale in 2023 and nearly sold out of plants.

Southern California, USA

The Palm Society of Southern California held a Zoom meeting on January 11, 2025, about pests afflicting palms in Southern California.

2025 Palm Pest Update

The presentation by Donald R. Hodel discussed and illustrated the most serious, current pests of palms in Southern California: the South American palm weevil, banana moth, and the invasive shot-hole borer; and covered their identification, damage, and management options. Insect pests have increasingly been responsible for premature palm death and disease in Southern California, especially since the arrival there of the South American palm weevil (*Rhynchophorus palmarum*) in 2011.



Beetle mania; image #2 shows South American palm weevil.

South Florida, USA

The South Florida Palm Society's Annual Spring Palm Show and Sale will take place at the University of Miami parking lot of the Gifford Arboretum on Saturday, March 8, 2025, from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm, and on Sunday, March 9, 9:00 am to 3:00 pm.
The sale will feature common, uncommon and rare palms and cycads from some of the best growers in Florida. The chapter will provide free tours of the Gifford Arboretum and Palmetum on Saturday and Sunday.

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