

PALM LITERATURE

PALM TREES: A STORY IN PHOTOGRAPHS. David Leaser. Westwood Pacific Publishing, Los Angeles, California, USA. 2005. ISBN: 1-59588-010-0. US \$39.95, cloth hardcover bound with platinum foil debossed title, color dust jacket. Pp 144.

David Leaser's new book, *Palm Trees: A Story in Photographs*, is brilliant in concept: Show the diversity, beauty and importance of palms through a large-format picture book, let the photographs do the talking and keep the text clean and simple. The book succeeds admirably and resoundingly! This is not a gardening book, nor is it a compendium of exotic, little-known palm species. It is a large-format "coffee table book" devoted to palms. It is the sort of book one can dip into at random or read cover to cover. Either way, the book is a treat.

Leaser's book begins with an introduction and two chapters examining the historical significance of palms and the cultural importance of the coconut. The bulk of the book comprises four chapters illustrating palms by geographic area: the Americas, Africa and the Indian Ocean, Europe and the Middle East, and Asia and Australia. The book ends with an excellent listing of public gardens where readers can see good palm collections in the USA, Australia and England. I noted that several important palm collections outside of these areas were omitted.

Some of the photos show palms in public spaces, others show palms in private gardens and still others show palms in the wild. Frequent visitors to Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden will recognize many of our palms in Leaser's book. Palms from the Huntington Library and Botanical Gardens in southern California and from several botanical gardens in Hawaii also make frequent appearances. I very much enjoyed thumbing through the book and seeing palms I know through the viewfinder of a professional photographer. Some of those palms have never looked so good!

Each chapter includes some text, which is clear, accurate and well written, but as the title

says, the story is told in the photographs. The "story" is not so much a narrative as it is a collection of brief anecdotes. The selection of palms in the book reflects Leaser's personal interests and travels. This is not a book in which to see exotic, never-before-illustrated rarities. In fact, most of the palms in the pages of this book are commonly cultivated species, but Leaser brings out the beauty in even the most common palms. At last, we have definitive photographs on pages 46 and 47 of coconut palms on a beach at sunset, of a bottle palm (*Hyophorbe lagenicaulis*) (p. 91), of *Phoenix canariensis* in Southern California (pp. 96 and 97) and of *Caryota* leaves aglow with back-lighting (p. 112). These subjects have been so well photographed in Leaser's book that any further attempt to portray them would be just plain futile.

Panoramic photos spread across two pages, interspersed with close-ups, portraits and vast expanses of white space, make each page a visual feast, but if I have any real criticism of this book, it is that many of the photos in this book are a bit too rich. The photos are just a bit too colorful, the skies are too blue and the lawns are too green. I am indebted to Don Hodel (pers. com.) for pointing out that some of the photos have been altered in more significant ways. For example, Don noted that the clouds in the dust jacket photo of Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden are the exact same clouds seen in the photo on pp. 132 and 133 of Hoomaluhia Botanic Garden in Hawaii. Purists might cry foul at Florida clouds transported to Hawaii, but I must admit, the resulting composite photo is pleasing. The technical wizardry and digital artistry sometimes overshadow the subjects of the photos, but the art of story telling allows for this sort of embellishment. No real harm is done by these artistic liberties.

Leaser's *Palm Trees: A Story in Photographs* is an attractive introduction to this photogenic family. No other book better illustrates the beauty of palms and their place in our gardens and in our hearts.

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