

# Villa Beccari – One Century Later

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1. Main  
 entrance  
 of the  
 Villa  
 Beccari.



**In the latter part of his life, the great Italian palm botanist, Odoardo Beccari, lived in a fine villa in the outskirts of Florence where he cultivated many palms. This paper explores the gardens of the Villa Beccari and lists which palms remain.**

Odoardo Beccari (1843–1920), was one of the most important palm figures of all times. He was born in Florence, where he lived and worked all his life, but he also travelled and collected extensively in the Old World tropics. His published works went even further; thanks to his many collaborators, he produced magnificent palm studies focused on many remote corners of the whole world. A long list of palm names commemorate him such as *Pritchardia beccariana* from Hawaii, *Licuala beccariana* from Papua New Guinea and the genus *Beccariophoenix* in Madagascar. The acronym “Becc.” commemorates him as the author of a plethora of palm names.

“Il Beccari,” as he is now known in Italy, owned a majestic villa in the outskirts of the city (Fig. 1), and about one century ago he planted its gardens with interesting species. He had the opportunity to obtain seeds of the rarest and newest palms of his age and tried some of the ones from colder climates in Florence, both in his garden and in the city botanic gardens, which he directed for years.

Florence in Central-Northern Italy is one of the most beautiful cities of the world but is not the perfect place to grow palms. It is located above latitude 43° North, 77 km away from the sea, and every winter it receives frosts that usually take the thermometers down to -3°C

(27°F) to -10°C (14°F). It may also receive extreme exceptional waves of hot or cold weather. Palms survived through the years up to a catastrophic freeze in 1985, which brought the thermometer down to -21°C (-6°F) in the centre of Florence and to -26°C (-15°F) in Villa Beccari.

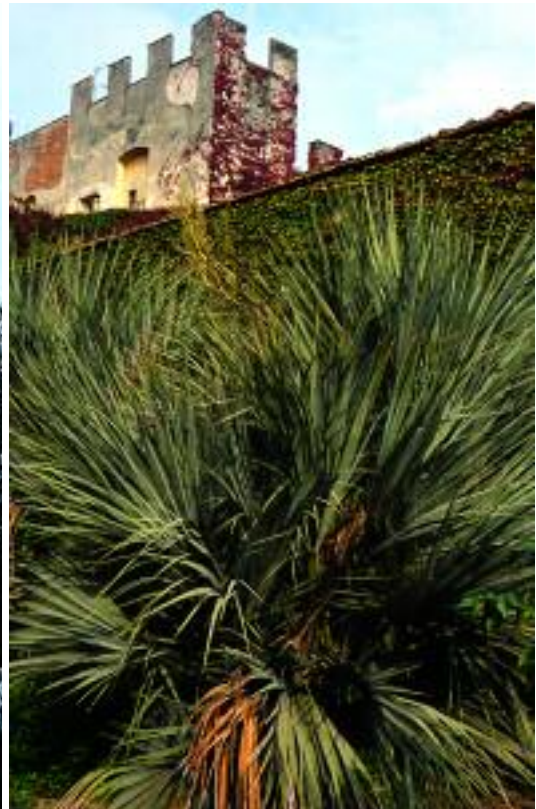
### The Villa and its park

Villa Beccari, also called Castello del Bisarno, has the general aspect of a castle. It was probably built in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century as a fortified building to control the nearby Via Cassia and the pass over the River Arno. It has belonged to the Beccari family since 1838, when Giuseppe Beccari, father of Odoardo, bought the property. The building is sited in a wide park divided into three parts. There is a wide lawn in front of the main entrance with large trees in its borders from mediterranean and temperate climates. Scattered close to the house grow two large yet trunkless *Jubaea chilensis*, two isolated *Trachycarpus fortunei*, and a group planting of this same species. In Florence this species grows to perfection when the soil is fertile enough, and in Villa Beccari it germinates and grows freely when allowed to in the shade of deciduous trees.

Two gardens closed by walls embrace the back and the sides of the castle, connected by iron gates to the main lawn. One of them is an Italian garden with symmetrical formal plots, the other is the *giardino d'acclimatazione*, where most of the unusual species were tried. A fourth area is the very large vegetable garden, with no palms or trees.

A beautiful iron gate leads into the Italian garden divided in plots bordered by low *Buxus* hedges. Palms are represented by a 14 m tall *Trachycarpus fortunei* (Fig. 2) and an old yet small sized *Nannorrhops ritchiana* with glaucous-green leaves (Figs. 3 & 4). The latter species is extremely tolerant to adversities of any kind. Its trunk can be upright, creeping or subterranean and there are specimens producing branches with multiple heads, with abundant tomentum in the leaf bases and persistent reins in the leaves. Each head blooms once in its life and dies after fruiting, while new stems take over. The clump at Villa Beccari was planted by Beccari in 1887. It grew slowly and in 1912 the 25 year old specimen was 3 m tall and 4.5 m in diameter with no exposed stems (Bean 1912). As time passed it became much larger but its arborescent stems

2 (left). An old *Trachycarpus fortunei* by the back patio, Villa Beccari. 3 (right). *Nannorrhops ritchiana*.



were killed by the 1985 freeze and it had to resprout from its base. The resulting growth of new suckers was very dense and in the 1990s the clump became too large for its plot. The owners decided to reduce it roughly to the original size and removed various heads. The actual size of the 118 years old specimen is 3 × 4 m (trunk to trunk, excluding leaves), its height is about 3 m and it is split in two groups. It has a total of 23 heads, with 8 and 15 heads in each group with an uncounted number of trunkless suckers. A few trunks have surpassed 1 m of height and the smaller group has bloomed recently. This admirable survivor can be compared to a *Nannorrhops* of roughly the same age which grows in the botanical garden of Rome. In Rome, the much milder climate allowed it to keep the scrambling aerial stems which now attain 10 m in length, as illustrate in a past issue of Palms (Morici 1999).

The next iron gate leads into the *giardino d'acclimatazione*, which is beautifully secluded by brick walls and has more arborescent species. A giant *Jubaea chilensis* (Fig. 5) towers above this courtyard. This palm, about 25 m tall, is the perfect complement to the walls of the monumental villa and is a living

monument to Odoardo's passion. The specimen is more than 113 years old, because Roster in 1922 described it as being about ten meters tall and more than 30 years old. It has wide scars on the upper part of the trunk, probably coinciding with the hardest freezes. In the winter of 1985 it lost all its leaves. An old *T. fortunei*, almost 20 m tall, grows close by.

Old plants of *Chamaerops humilis* are scattered in the garden and at least one of them belongs to one of the varieties described by the Italian botanist. It is a healthy female specimen of *Chamaerops humilis* var. *dactylocarpa* (Fig. 6). I had never seen one before and I was gladly surprised to see that its bright yellow-orange fruits are truly reminiscent of dates as its name suggests, as they are longer than any other form of this variable species. The clump measures 5 m in diameter and is 2.5 m tall.

Some large *Trachycarpus fortunei* grow along a wall and one of them is different. Two of them are solitary palms, almost 20 m tall, and the fourth is an 8 m tall clumping individual. It has four fertile female trunks, between 3.5 and 6.5 m tall, a fifth sterile trunk 1.5 m and a few trunkless shoots. Beccari obtained seeds of this

4 (left). *Nannorrhops ritchiana*, Villa Beccari. 5 (right). *Jubaea chilensis*, Villa Beccari.





6. *Chamaerops humilis* var. *dactylocarpa*, Villa Beccari.

clumping form of *T. fortunei* collected from four mother-plants growing in Sunset Park, Los Angeles. He never described it as a new species but the invalid name *T. caespitosa* Becc. has been used. Beccari supposed that the clumping *T. fortunei* was something new and wrote a letter to his friend G. Roster about a possible new species. The note was published by Roster in 1915 as an announcement of a new species named *T. caespitosa* Becc. but it lacked a proper description. Beccari's note explains that the palm was introduced in California by a Japanese horticulturist and that it is similar to *T. fortunei*. He noted differences in the upright clumping habit, in its flowers being smaller than any other then-known species and in its seeds which are more reniform than in *T. fortunei*, twice larger than high, reminding those of *T. takil*. He also mentioned that one clump originating from a single seed can have different sexes on different stems while each stem is individually unisexual. As time passed he probably realized that the differences were not enough to describe it as a new taxon, and in fact, these plants are now considered merely clumping forms of *T. fortunei*.

Besides palms, the gardens host some plants which are worth mentioning; there is an old tree of *Lagerstroemia indica* and a majestic columnar cactus (Fig. 7) planted very close to a wall. It grew to about 8 m helped by the

protection of the roof flap. A group of an uncommon tulip species survived in front of the greenhouse until 2002, even though the Botanical Garden of Florence tried to the plants. *Tulipa beccariana* was discovered by Beccari in the hills of Tuscany, when he still was a teenager (Cellai Ciuffi et al. 1999).

#### What did we lose with the freezes?

More palm species might have existed in the gardens, but no complete reports have ever been published until 1999 (Cellai Ciuffi et al.). According to Roster (1913–15), there were various plants of *Trachycarpus takil* Becc. which started to flower in 1902, but none of them is left. Bean (1912) and Roster (1913–15) published pictures of a beautiful 4 or 5 m tall plant in the Villa. At least one of them was still alive in 1985 when it was killed by the frost (Cellai Ciuffi et al. 1999). A hybrid between *Phoenix canariensis* and *P. dactylifera* was being tried in 1922 (Roster). A *Butia capitata*, probably planted in the early years of the century, died in early 1980s. One old specimen of this palm still lives in the center of Florence in the large courtyard in front of the Herbarium of the University, where Odoardo spent many years of his working life. A large solitary *Phoenix* survived to 1985 but died some 12 years later. It was senescent, and its trunk, which had deep cavities excavated by frost, broke during a regular winter. It was similar to



7. A columnar cactus growing against the Villa Beccari.

*P. sylvestris*, and it is unclear if it was or not the hybrid mentioned before (F. Oste pers. comm.). Beccari planted both species of *Washingtonia*; *W. robusta* died at an unknown date, and *W. filifera* died in 1985 (F. Oste pers. comm.).

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