

Guide to Palms and Palm-like Plants

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Abstract

A photographic collection of palms and palm-like plants native to Dominica has been assembled to help future students and instructors identify the plants that they will encounter. Each page includes a description of the plant, uses, and a photograph when available.

Introduction

Plants in the family Arecaceae, palms, are very distinctive. They are an icon of tropical islands and provide an accent in the landscape because of their shape and texture. Many palms also are used for their products such as fiber, building materials, or food products. Many manufactured goods are also made from palms and their fruits.

There are several palms that are native to Dominica. The varying landscapes and elevations of Dominica provide diverse habitats for these palms, ranging from dry coastal areas to wet cloud forests 3000 feet or more above sea level.

There are also plants not in the family Arecaceae but that closely resemble palms. These plants can belong to many other families but the two included in this report are plants from the families Cyclanthaceae and Cyperaceae. These plants also vary in the type of habitats in which they are found and are important to the structure of the ecosystems of which they are a part.

The palms and palm-like plants featured here are common in and around Springfield and in the National Parks of Dominica. Knowing how to identify and distinguish these plants will aid in better understanding of the areas that one might visit while in Dominica.

Materials and Methods

Photographs of plants found in the family Arecaceae, and those resembling the family Arecaceae, were compiled from four different locations: Springfield and surrounding countryside, Emerald Pool, Freshwater and Boeri Lakes, and Middleham Falls (the latter located in Morne Trois Piton National Park). Photographs were taken using a digital camera and the document with the pictures included was completed on a computer. Transportation to the sites was provided by our tour guide Clem James, while on field trips or by our professors, Dr. Tom Lacher and Dr. Bob Wharton. Field identifications were made by Dr. Lacher and later confirmed using Gentry (1993) and Lack et al. (1997).

Results

The guide contains a collection of ten palms and palm-like plants, photographs and a description of each, and a table of contents.

Discussion

This project can be continued to include those palms that are now found on the island but are not native. Some of the palms used in the landscape have been brought in from other areas and are now prominent accents in the landscape.

Also, pictures can be gathered to supplement this guide and to provide a visual representation of the palms that a photo is not available for.

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Works Cited

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Palms

Acrocomia aculeata

This palm, along with *Syagrus*, is one of the two most common palms of scrub and coastal woodland areas (dry areas). The leaf stalk and sheath have stout spines, the only common Dominican palm to have this characteristic. The palm reaches a height of 7 to 8 meters, the inflorescence is brownish with yellow flowers, and the fruits are 3 to 4 cm, buff colored, and with an edible white pulp resembling coconut in taste. It is said to have a windswept look because the leaves have leaflets held irregularly at many different angles.

Cocos nucifera

This palm is restricted to seashores except where cultivated and then has naturalized. Leaves typically have a yellowish cast with stiff narrow leaflets; also vegetatively characterized by the typically curved and slightly swollen trunk base. The coconut palm produces fruit almost year round. The fruits are important to Dominica because of the oils, fruit pulp, nuts, and many manufactured goods both exported and sold in local markets.



Euterpe broadwayi

A very common palm of the rainforest understorey. It can reach a height of 15m and have a long leaf (to 5m) with narrow drooping leaflets. The inflorescences are dark red, have a very branched structure (80-100 branches) with small white flowers and are produced just below the leaf rosette. The terminal buds are fed upon by parrots and used by locals as “heart of palm”, a delicacy.



Geonoma interrupta

An understory palm of montane forest and rainforest (Syndicate, Middleham), this small spindly palm has an untidy appearance because the leaves have leaflets of varying widths. The leaves were sometimes used for thatching temporary shelters.



Prestoea acuminata

At high elevation to the mountain summits, this palm takes the place of *Euterpe broadwayi*. It is smaller in all parts (2-7m height) and the leaflets are erect and rigid. Inflorescences are much shorter than *Euterpe* and less branched (less than 50 branches) and are white to deep magenta. *Prestoea* flowers April-June and the buds are attractive to imperial parrots.



Roystonea oleracea

Called the royal palm, this palm is a very tall (40-50m high) elegant palm native to the Lesser Antilles. It has a tapered trunk with a wide pedestal sprouting many roots and a very long (5m) conspicuous leaf sheath at the top. When dried, this leaf sheath can be used in hat making. *Roystonea* has inflorescences several at a time below the leaf crown. The growing point provides an excellent palm cabbage.



Syagrus amara

This palm has a ragged appearance similar to *Acrocomia* (leaflets irregularly arranged), with which it shares the coastal habitat, but it has no spines. This palm is about 15-20m tall. Inflorescences hang below the leaves and are rather conspicuous, green and yellow scented flowers; fruits orange, bitter. Leaves are used for making local house brooms.

Palm-like Plants

Asplundia insignis (Family Cyclanthaceae)

This plant is similar to *A. rigida* (see next species) but is a large terrestrial rosette plant with broader leaves, often not divided into the fish-tail form. Fruits ripen mainly between August and December. It is not quite so abundant as *A. rigida* but nevertheless frequent in the forests. The leaves of both plants are used as thatching for overnight shelters. They can also be used for lining pots and baskets.



Asplundia rigida

The rather palm-like fish-tail leaves of this climber adorn so many rain forest trees in the wetter areas that this will probably be the first climber to be noticed. It is abundant throughout the rain forest even in the dimmest of light. The inflorescence, mainly produced March-May, has spirally arranged flowers in unisexual groups, most striking being the male flowers which are white and consist of a bract and a boss of stamens opening for just one night. The fruit is a small rather arum-like spike, borne in September to October.



Cyperus spp. (Family Cyperaceae)

The most prevalent neotropical sedge genus, this group of species grows along watercourses and in other wet places. All have brownish inflorescences atop often three-angled stems up to 1m.

