

# Montgomery Botanical NEWS

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# Searching for Syagrus



Larry Noblick collecting *Syagrus lilliputiana* in Mato Grosso do Sul.

Somewhere in the distant past, the coconut and its sister genus *Syagrus* shared a common ancestor in South America. Many of these coconut relatives are poorly known local endemics growing in fragmented cerrados and rocky campo rupestre areas of central Brazil. My trip objective was to explore these lesser known *Syagrus*, many of which are threatened by the widespread cultivation of soybeans and sugarcane.

In southwestern Goiás state, Harri Lorenzi and I found a cerrado fragment that had been preserved by a local soybean grower as required by Brazilian law. Compared to the thousands of acres cleared to plant horizon to horizon soybean fields, it is not much. Yet, in this small fragment we discovered a little-known species. In the neighboring 30,000 hectare Parque Nacional das Emas, we discovered yet another unknown species.

Next we searched and found a new species in the Parque Nacional da Chapada dos Guimarães in the state of Mato Grosso (see photo at top right). Our truck broke down as we left the park, leaving us with no power steering, unable to charge the battery and no fan to cool the engine. We were stranded for the rest of the day and over half of the next while we waited for the broken part to be delivered.

We then drove to Niquelândia (a nickel rich region) in northern Goiás to see *S. longipedunculata*, which I had not yet seen in the field. We proceeded south the next morning and collected several samples of *S. glazioviana* and confirmed that anatomically that they were all the same.

This helped us to also confirm that the new species near Goiania was just another *S. glazioviana*.

Next, I traveled with Ricardo Pimenta, who had recently discovered and described a new species (*S. pompei*) from Bela Vista, Mato Grosso do Sul. We also discovered the first known population of *S. loefgrenii* in Mato Grosso do Sul and found *S. lilliputiana* (see photo above), along with several other poorly known species of *Syagrus* and *Butia*.

In exploring the state of Minas Gerais, Harri and I found additional populations of *S. angustifolia*, more of the *S. glazioviana* complex and collected different forms of *S. minor*. We searched for them in a remote cerrado – over 100 miles of dirt road – between Chapada Gaucha and Montalvania in northern Minas Gerais, and gained a greater understanding of these species. We proceeded south to Serra do Cabral near Joaquin Felicio and investigated a new diminutive palm species growing just outside of the state park. It was close to dusk when we arrived at the population (cover photo). Its iron specific soil requirements made it difficult to locate, especially since part of the population had been destroyed by mining interests (background photo). In the search for this palm, we accidentally locked the keys in the car, forcing us to break a window.

During just the first month of this expedition, we managed to travel over 11,000 km (ca. 6,900 miles) in five different states in search of these fascinating palms! Thanks again to MBC and the many donors (pages 10 and 11) who help to make this field research possible.

Larry Noblick, Ph.D., Palm Biologist  
larryn@montgomerybotanical.org



# Hidden remote palms illuminate the coconut's family tree



Larry Noblick collecting a new species at Parque Nacional da Chapada dos Guimarães in the state of Mato Grosso.



Larry in a "field" of *Syagrus minor*.

**Background: Removal of surface iron ore is threatening the survival of a newly discovered species.**