



Bismarckia nobilis, at nearly 15 years old, was the first palm planted from seed in the arboretum.

143

Finca Cañaote, Venezuela

Nearly 20 years ago **DAVID CLULOW** moved from England to South America and immediately started to plant a garden. Here he writes about some of the trees he has been growing.

I purchased Finca Cañaote in central Venezuela in September 1995. Although technically in the *llanos* (the plains) we are very fortunate to be at the base of a locally famous mountain Tiramutu, which gives us a wonderful borrowed landscape and I like to think of us as a mini Kirstenbosch!

Having plenty of space, I selected around six hectares of pasture with a beautiful mountain view and immediately set about planting an arboretum. The nurseries in Venezuela are very primitive, rarely knowing any scientific names. Therefore I began acquiring seeds from all over the world. Now almost everything in the arboretum has been grown from seed. I decided to specialize in ultra-tropical fruits and palms which would like my hot climate all year. We are just over 9 °N and at around 183 m elevation. We rarely get below 22 °C. When I lived in England, I was over 19 years on the RHS Orchid Committee and thought that here I would be able to indulge my passion for orchids. How wrong I was! Although very hot all year and very wet from June to November, we get almost no rain from February to

April inclusive—and the orchids, mainly *Phalaenopsis* hated the dry season and slowly faded away. Our water is pumped from wells and although excellent for drinking it is as hard as London water and this alkaline pH was probably another reason the orchids faded away. However some of the local xerophytic orchids, a few taxa of *Oncidium*, some *Cynoches* spp. and *Catasetum* spp. do well here and we rescue these from cut trees or from wind falls and set them on mango trees, but cultivated orchids even *Dendrobium* will not tolerate the dry season and alkaline water. The plants in the nursery area are well looked after but once they are planted out in the arboretum they are on their own. We do not have the manpower to irrigate, therefore the plants survive or they die.

As you approach the finca, we tell visitors if they see three massive Gebang palms, *Corypha utan*, then they have missed the driveway! Coming up the drive we have a big tropical oak *Platymiscium* sp., a few Spanish plums *Spondias purpurea* and a huge and superb flamboyant tree, *Delonix regia* which covers itself in brilliant scarlet/orange flowers beloved by butterflies. There is also an enormous Merecure *Licania pyrifolia* which has heavy fruits like elongated eggs, edible, the locals like them but I find them very mealy and not very good. Even our monkeys won't eat them. Approaching the house we have some nice traveller's palms, *Ravenala madagascariensis*. Not palms at all but members of the birds-of-paradise family Strelitziaceae and closely related to the bananas. When pruned to a single stem they make the most appealing distichous (pure fan like arrangement of leaves) small tree. Just in front of the house is a 21 m (seed raised) *Magnolia champaca* which when in season perfumes the whole area with its enchanting aroma. When I gardened in England, I had an NCCPG collection of *Magnolia* (over 300 taxa), now here I

Tahina spectabilis, the newest and most interesting palm to have been introduced this decade. It is extremely rare and the plants growing at Finca Cañaote are probably the only ones in South America. This seedling is four years 11 months from sowing the seed.





This plant of the rare *Medemia argun* (photographed in August 2012) was planted in June 2005 from seed sown in February 2004.

have just one taxon. I grew a number of *Magnolia grandiflora* from seed but in this heat they just faded away, none reaching more than a foot tall.

There was quite a good selection of rare fruit trees here when we arrived. Ranging in size from the huge mangoes and the equally big but dioecious Mamon *Meliococcus bijugatus*. We have seven of these but only two females. The fruit is rather like a smallish green lychee. Very good to eat and the local children climb these trees to collect the fruit which they sell at the roadside. The male trees have a wonderful scent and perfume the garden, so although we do not get any fruit they are worth keeping just for their perfume. One of our staff suffers from hay fever and when these trees are in flower he has a miserable time as he appears to be allergic to their pollen. Much smaller is the superb Guanábana with its horrid English name of soursop, *Annona muricata*, which has big, spiky fruit up to 2 kg and makes one of the very best breakfast juices. There is tamarind, *Tamarindus indica* but we do not bother to collect its fruit and also cashew nuts, *Anacardium occidentale*. We have two forms one with yellow cashew apples and the other with red. Amazingly the locals here just eat the cashew apples and throw away the cashew nuts. The cashew will thrive on marginal soil which will not support much else of value and I did suggest to our local mayor that it could be a good idea to build a communal plant to process the cashew nuts which have a caustic vapor in their shells and need special processing but he was not interested. Although the cashew nut is native to this region, the majority of these valuable nuts are produced and exported from India. We have three Cotoperís, *Talisia olivaeformis*. One is now a rounded bush some 15.25 m in diameter and as far as we know none has ever flowered or fruited. Apparently



Copernicia prunifera, the Carnuba wax palm. Its wax is the hardest of all waxes and it is used to polish the most expensive cars and many other applications. The single tall one is some 11 years two months from seed and the small ones are five years six months from seed.

at the Kampong, David Fairchild's garden in Miami, they have a tree some 90 years old which has not as yet fruited. Our big one is taking up too much important space and I think will have to go.

Now to some of the fruits we have raised from seed. The first one to fruit was the Surinam cherry, *Eugenia uniflora*. Slightly resinous but very pleasant to eat and they can be used like raisins in baking. These are often used for hedges. Although we have around 20 trees we never seem to have enough fruit for both our use and our monkeys. The next to fruit was the star fruit, *Averrhoa carambola*, again a small tree very pretty purple flowers and quite decorative when covered in quantities of fruit. Probably our most successful fruit is the Bacupari, *Rheedia brasiliensis*. I have yet to find anyone who does not like this fruit on first tasting. It is like a smallish but bright yellow lychee. It will start fruiting at only three years from seed making a small but very decorative bush when covered in fruit and it is possible to collect fruit at any season. I would recommend anyone, who has tropical conditions, to plant this. Another great success is the ultra rare Kariis, *Garcinia* sp. ign. but possibly *G. laterifolia*; this has fruit like a bright orange small mandarin, again with instant taste appeal. The seeds of these were sent to me by Professor Roberto Coronel from the Institute of Plant Breeding in the Philippines. As far as I know, we are the only rare fruiters to have success with this outside its native country. It could easily

have commercial possibilities here. We have had moderate success with the governor's plum, *Flacourtia indica*. This is dioecious and although we planted some 15 specimens we got 13 males and just two females. The fruit tastes just like an English plum but much smaller and containing a small number of edible seeds. We have over 40 huge mature Santol trees, *Sandoricum koetjape* raised from seeds sent to us from Australia. At first we didn't think much of them, just eating the fluffy flesh around (which adheres strongly to) the seeds but then we were told that it was the flesh just under the skin which was the best bit to eat and now this is a favorite fruit of the local children. Most of the locals now have at least one young tree on their land. We have had moderate success with the Galip nut, *Canarium indicum* from New Guinea. They fruit well but a few of them are dying back. Apart from Australia this is possibly the only planting outside of its native area. The nut is about the same size as a Brazil nut but there are three little nuts inside each shell which makes them a little difficult to remove but they taste just as good as a Brazil nut. My biggest mistake has been the curry bush, *Murraya koenigii*; apart from having a nasty smell, it is highly invasive. Seedlings are appearing all over the finca and even on neighbours' properties some distance away.

The Ross Canistel, *Pouteria* Ross was originally thought to be a hybrid of the canistel, *P. campechiana* but Kew thinks it is a new species and wants some flowers for identification but I never seem to find any. It makes a rather fastigiated tree so would be good in small gardens, the fruit is decidedly superior to the ordinary canistel and it produces a lot more of them. It makes a lovely ice cream or milk shake and the monkeys love them just as they are. Another surprising success is the Joazeiro, *Ziziphus joazeiro*. Seed was sent to me from a friend in Brazil and I thought they would be rather poor. However to our great surprise the fruit, although small is delightful, like a small crab apple and very good. We also have the Indian Jujube, *Ziziphus mauritiana* but here it does not fruit very well and is decidedly inferior to the Joazeiro. The chocolate pudding fruit or black Sapote, *Diospyros digyna* grows very well here. The black colour is a little off-putting at first but it is an excellent fruit and a great favorite of the monkeys.

Now for some of our palms, undoubtedly the tallest is the hapaxanthic fish-tail palm *Caryota urens*. These are now around 24 m tall with just one trunk. One has already flowered and died. We also have some very big bushes of the much smaller, multi-trunked *Caryota mitis*. It is difficult to believe it is hapaxanthic. It has been flowering and fruiting for years and is still alive. Being multi-trunked possibly the older stems die whilst new ones are formed. Another hapaxanthic palm, my favourite feather palm, is *Wallichia disticha* which as its name suggests grows in a perfect fan shape. It comes from tropical areas of lowland Himalayas. Two have already flowered; one has fruited and died whilst the other one, being only around 4.5 m tall, we cut off any inflorescence as it appears and this seems to have prevented it from

forming thousands of seeds and then dying.

The first palm seedling we planted in the arboretum was the superb *Bismarckia nobilis* from Madagascar. This first specimen is now around 9 m tall and is a male. We have since planted quite a few more and should get a female one to flower soon. Very similar in colour to *Bismarckia* is the gingerbread palm from East Africa, *Hyphaene coriacea*. When young, this looks as though it will be multi-trunked. However, as it gets older, it is one of those rare palms which form a tree shape. Ours are still quite small but there are some wonderful mature specimens of this in the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Miami. Related to this is the ultra rare *Medemia argun* which was thought to be extinct until re-discovered at Wadi Delah in the Sudan in 1995. I have just one nice specimen but it is dioecious.

Two successes from Australia have been the common *Carpentaria acuminata* one specimen now very tall and the Mataranka fan palm *Livistona rigida*. This palm is rare in cultivation as it needs very hot temperatures and a decided dry season of at least three months. The only good fruiting specimens in this country are here. This grows wild around Alice Springs in Central Australia.

We planted seeds of *Washingtonia rigida*, *W. filifera* and *Anonidia merrillii* on the same day and the seedlings were planted out at the same time. *Washingtonia rigida* has reached around 21 m, *W. filifera* around half of this and the *Anonidia* (old name *Veitchia*) just around 4.5 m. *Roystonea regia* and *R. oleracea* have both reached around 15.25 m planted at around the same time. The Latan palms are doing well, we have just two blue ones *Latania lontaroides* and were lucky as we have both a male and a female and get fertile seeds. The red Latan *L. loddigesii* are much slower but very attractive with their red petioles. Probably our rarest palm is *Tahina spectabilis*; this was only discovered in a remote part of the Analalava District of northwestern Madagascar in 2007. It is Madagascar's largest palm and is hapaxanthic. It is only known to have flowered once, although another tree is reported to be in bud. I planted out two seedlings in 2010 but the huge and dreaded Coco palm beetle *Strategus aloeus* killed them (and a lot more of my young palms). This year I have planted three more around the house where I can take more care of them. Another palm from this area which has been very successful is *Dypsis madagascariensis*. It is a smallish, usually clumping palm and if pruned to a single stem looks magnificent. We have planted around 50 and not lost a single one in the dry season.

My main hobby is hybridizing *Adenium* the desert rose. This is very exciting, new breakthroughs are being made all the time, the latest being the emergence of doubles.

Finally we also have a Monkey Rescue Centre where we look after abandoned baby (and not so baby) monkeys. At the moment we have 29 and they take some looking after. I thought I would retire to get some rest... now I'm working harder than ever!