

Collecting the South American Giants

by Larry Noblick, Ph.D., Collections Manager

Giants? Yes, and like a knight after his dragons, I was crazy enough to go after the biggest South American palms, called the American Oil Palms or Attaleoids. Everything about these trees is awesome, from the 50-80 cm diameter trunks to the 7-9 m long leaves, the 2 m long flowering clusters, and the heavy fruit bunches that sometimes require two people to lift. The thought of having to press one of these giants into 30 x 35 cm pieces for vouchersing would fill any botanist with terror, dread, and despair. No wonder so few have been collected! Nevertheless, on my 1997 trip to Brazil, I set out to bag some of the “big ones.”

And so it was that I and a former college roommate, Lester, headed north one morning from Teófilo Otoni, Minas Gerais, in search of Attaleoids. We pulled up to a group of locals waiting for a bus and inquired about the palms. They directed us down the road to an old farmer, Manuel Barreto. His wife (his third) had died from a snake bite just a few months earlier; but in spite of his sad mood, he and his 12 year-old granddaughter agreed to take us up into the forest. Well, Lester, who lives in Central Ohio, and I are both “flat-landers,” and it was

all we could do to keep up with the 73 year-old Manuel as he charged up the hill in his bare feet not far behind his energetic granddaughter. We were relieved that he paused occasionally to tell us some of the local history. We descended to a small, swiftly flowing river filled with slime-covered rocks, where Manuel and his granddaughter were amused to see the “gringo botanist” plunge in with both boots and proceed to dance around on the slippery rocks. However, Lester, being more cautious and not willing to treat his newly acquired boots so brutally, unlaced them and waded across barefoot. It was all uphill from the stream and when we

reached the forest, we were rewarded with an abundance of recently fallen fruits from several different trees of *Attalea camposportoana*. Although one of the trees was short enough to get all of the necessary parts for vouchersing, there were a few heart-throbbing moments as I pulled my way up the trunk, which was covered with slippery leaf bases. The giddiness over our successful collection was quickly weighed down by the heavy sacks of fruit and plant material we had to carry back to Manuel's place. Coming to the same river, I managed to successfully dance my way back across the slimy rocks again. However, Lester, in spite of his barefooted precautions, ended up sitting on the river bottom while holding his camera high and dry.

Back at the house, I paid Manuel and his granddaughter for their time, and he hospitably treated us to several cups of coffee made from his own beans. My wet college buddy really enjoyed his hot coffee after his cool plunge. As we headed back to the car, it was as if we were bidding goodbye to relatives. All of us had been greatly enriched by the encounter and I think we left Manuel in better spirits than when we found him, providing

him with a rather amusing day.

Summarizing the 1997 trip, I spent two months in Brazil, traveling over 8,000 kilometers. I sent back over 3,740 seeds, and left many more with my Brazilian collaborators. These represented 51 accessions of 24 palm species from Paraíba, Pernambuco, Bahia, Minas Gerais, Espírito Santo, and Goiás, highlighted by 8 species of giant Attaleoids—*Attalea oleifera*, *A. burretiana*, *A. seabrensis*, *A. pindobasu*, *A. funifera*, *A. camposportoana*, *A. brasiliensis*, and *Orbignia brejinhoensis*. Many of these giants have never been

cultivated before, but promise to become major landscape features at the Montgomery Botanical Center.



Manuel and his granddaughter look on as Larry's friend Lester shows off a young fruiting stalk of *Attalea camposportoana*.