Sumatran Whips
by Terrence Walters, Executive Director

After four years of developing numerous collaborative programs through emails, letters, and faxes with the world-famous Bogor Botanic Garden in Indonesia, I was able to visit this magnificent garden and meet the individuals with whom I had been corresponding in August of 2000. I also conducted an expedition with the garden’s staff to the Indonesian island of Sumatra. The primary objective of the expedition was to obtain wild, thoroughly documented population samples of as many rattan palm species as possible.

Rattans are slender palms that climb onto other plants, often by hooks on long whip-like structures called cirri and flagella. Rattans are usually armed with dangerous spines on their primary stem and leaves. Well over 650 rattan species, represented by 13 genera, occur in the Old World tropics. They are, however, poorly represented in preserved or living collections because the plants are difficult to handle. They are also not grown under cultivation because of their aggressive climbing habit, fierce armature, great length, and unwieldy and intractable nature. Consequently, little is known about rattan cultivation, and most canes used in manufacturing are obtained from the wild.

Joko Witono organized and led the Sumatran expedition. Two other Bogor staff, Samsu Sujahman and Enday Sudarso, joined us on the one-month trip to collect herbarium specimens and seeds of rattans. On August 2, the four of us began our adventure by taking the ferry from populous Java to wild Sumatra. The expedition was a long and laborious one for me and my staff. I think we were all very happy to reach the fruits, we usually found that the seeds were not yet mature. Nevertheless, after so much work, we proceeded with the hour-long task of making multiple herbarium specimens, each specimen including part of the stem, leaves, and reproductive parts (e.g., flowers, fruits). If the fruits were mature, we would also collect 100 or more of them.

Many of the species we collected had 5-10-m-long whips (i.e., flagella) coming off of the main stem. These whips were covered with recurved barbs which tear at your clothes and skin if you move just slightly in the wrong direction. I soon learned to sense when these whips grabbed me as I walked. Immediately, I would back up to release the recurved barbs and detach the whip.

At the end of the expedition, which was a great success thanks to the commitment, hard work, and unending energy of Joko, Samsu, and Enday, we returned to Bogor to clean the seeds, place the herbarium specimens in dryers, and then divide the collection between our institutions. We collected 89 seed accessions representing 13 palm genera. Of these, 20 were accessions of rattans. One full set of herbarium specimens was deposited at the herbarium at Bogor, and a duplicate set was sent to the Kew Herbarium in London for name verification.

MBC recently designated a large tract of land in the southwestern corner of our 120-acre property for the development of a scientific and educational rattan collection. The South Florida Chapter of the International Palm Society contributed funds to MBC to purchase and plant large trees that will ultimately provide support for the rattans. In three to five years, young vines produced by the Sumatran seeds will be transplanted to this area, where they will scale their arboreal supports, reaching for the Miami sky.