

Montgomery Botanical Center (MBC) has wild-collected population samples of palms and cycads from all over the world, but very few from Florida other than the native populations growing naturally on site. We had been ignoring our own backyard! So, in November 2005, Harvey Bernstein, MBC's imaging specialist, and I embarked on a Florida palm-collecting trip.

Twelve of the 14 native palm species of the continental U.S. occur in Florida. Six are found only in the Florida Keys or in the Everglades, one is extinct, leaving five for the rest of the state. The St. Joseph Peninsula State Park in Florida's panhandle is truly spectacular. This narrow, over



Highlands Hammock State Park, Dr. Noblick climbing to examine *Sabal palmetto* fruit

seven-mile long spit of land with pure sugar white sand, miles of pristine beach and dune vegetation distinguishes it as one of Florida's most scenic beaches. It is also the most-western historic distribution for the cabbage palm, *Sabal palmetto*. The *S. palmetto* populations west of St. Joseph are believed to have been planted. The unfriendly saw palmetto, *Serenoa repens*, grows in abundance at St. Joseph, as it does in much of Florida, and is an intriguing species. From one corner of the state to the other, it varies in color from dark green, yellow-green, or blue to silver-green and it varies from nearly stemless popula-

FLORIDA HAS PALMS, TOO!



Lake Wales Ridge, *Sabal etonia* in foreground

of the needle palm, *Rhapidophyllum hystrix*. On its trunk, abundant leaf litter-gathering needles exist with nests of "killer" biting ants. Harvey and I "painfully" collected mature seed between these needles while fighting off the ants. We developed a technique that was fairly successful, but finding seed was due to sheer luck rather than skill. The needle palm is known to recover from temperatures as low as -15 degrees Fahrenheit, making it one of the most cold-tolerant palms in the world.

Two to five million years ago, St. Joseph-like ocean sand dune formations graced a 100-mile chain of ancient islands down the center of Florida now forming the Lake Wales Ridge. While most of the rest of Florida had been submerged at numerous times, the Lake Wales Ridge remains unsubmerged and its ecosystems essentially undisturbed since the Miocene. These Lake Wales paleoislands are home to Florida's oldest and rarest plants. Today, more than 300 feet above sea level, those dunes abound with saw palmetto and the scrub palmetto, *Sabal etonia*.

Nestled between the Lake Wales dunes lies a well-developed, moist hammock—Highlands Hammock State Park—with a few dwarf palmettos, rare needle palms, many 80-foot cabbage palms, and 1,000-year-old live oaks. It is absolutely a "must see" ancient forest, a step back in time and the best place in the state to appreciate the beauty and majesty of the "real" Florida.

While the scrub palmetto may abound in Lake Wales Ridge State Forest, we spotted the tallest trunked scrub palmetto in Silver River State Park near Ocala. It is just one of the many clear water springs that dot the northern half of the state. Another, called Ponce de Leon Springs, named for the famous Spanish explorer, could have been the legendary fountain of youth. Maybe that explains why the most common palm there was... *Sabal MINOR!*

Florida has many natural scenic habitats, interesting geology, and fascinating legends making our state a fun place to go palm-collecting.

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tions to those with trunks up to several meters in height. Imagine the difficulties the early pioneers had traversing the state when saw palmetto blanketed Florida in seemingly endless and unbroken stands.

Just north of St. Joseph Peninsula State Park are some of the state's most beautiful forests in Florida Caverns and Torreya State Parks. Both are excellent places to appreciate the rare, silvery, palmate beauty



Dr. Noblick with *Rhapidophyllum hystrix* in Florida Caverns State Park.