

Montgomery Botanical

NEWS

Fall/Winter 2020 *Volume 28, Number 2*



Three Decades
of Growth
page 3

Florida's Last
Buccaneer Palm
page 6

A Relic from
Times Past
pages 4-5

Advancing Research, Conservation, and Education through Scientific Plant Collections

A Relic from Times Past

Montgomery constantly explores for new palms and cycads – our scientists' work has brought numerous novel finds to botany. Discovery is a potent inspiration! But one palm known even to the ancients evaded Colonel Montgomery. Theophrastus himself – Aristotle's own student and the FATHER OF BOTANY – wrote of it thousands of years ago, "*In Crete some palm trees are said to split into two or even three branches. There are even **five headed palms***" – a description so incredible, it was repeated by Pliny the Elder 300 years later!

Surprisingly, this mythic "lost palm" went unknown to botanical science until 1967, when a young Curator at the Geneva Conservatory, Dr. Werner Greuter, followed these ancient texts to Crete. Greuter named it *Phoenix theophrasti*, after the venerable author whose account inspired his trek. Recent paleobotanical study established that this species is indeed quite old – unchanged on Crete since the ice age, even while date palms were widely cultivated throughout the Mediterranean.

This mythic "lost palm"
went unknown to
science until 1967

Patrick collecting leaflet specimens for conservation research on the south coast of Crete. These leaflets provide genetic data to determine how diverse this major palm grove is compared to plants in gardens.

I am deeply thankful to Professor Pirintsos, Ourania Gregoriadou, and Tonya Griffith for their help and enthusiasm, and to the Directorate of Forest Protection for permission to perform this study, a collaboration of the Botanical Garden of the University of Crete and Montgomery. The work was generously funded by Montgomery's PLANT EXPLORATION FUND.

Background: Patrick and Ourania hike towards an isolated Theophrastus Palm near Toplou Monastery in Eastern Crete.

I longed to see this plant after reading these accounts. To my surprise, not only was Theophrastus' Palm not on the Montgomery grounds, but it had never been grown here! And so many questions remain about its origins and persistence. Thusly motivated, I joined with Professor Stergios Pirintsos to develop a study and conservation project.

In late 2019 Tonya (my wife and field assistant) and I worked with Stergios and his student, Ourania Grigoriadou, to track down specimens and seeds. As first noted by Dr. Greuter, this palm only grows in the most remote and wild parts of Crete, itself a distant isle. In this place where people have cultivated both dates and civilizations for *five thousand years*, it is amazing to see such healthy, robust native palm groves as those at Vai, Preveli and Itanos – a sight the first Minoans certainly enjoyed.

M. Patrick Griffith, Executive Director
patrick@montgomerybotanical.org

research near Preveli
ic information to
ed to other groves

Ourania and Tonya underneath a very old and massive *Phoenix theophrasti* at the Itanos ruins. This palm had many trunks, far more than the 5-trunked palm that so impressed Theophrastus! Palms here sprout from the site of an important Bronze Age port – also visible on the cover of this issue.

