

# In Search of the Makalani Palm

As soon as international field collaborations became feasible again, we rekindled our efforts to study and conserve the iconic Makalani Palm. *Hyphaene petersiana* grows across the vast savannas of southern Africa, but at the edges of its range in Namibia, the palm is often found in scattered oases along waterways.


With a team of experts from Namibia, Switzerland and the US, we set out northwards from Windhoek through an immense, dry landscape. Long hours of dust and gravel were punctuated by the occasional wandering giraffe. As the sun dipped below the northwest horizon, we finally saw our first silhouette of the elusive palm. Bivouacked for a cold desert night, we rose at dawn to make our first specimens.

Two more weeks camping and searching yielded important treasures – the first complete male and female specimens for the Windhoek herbarium, numerous seeds to grow in Windhoek, Geneva, and Miami, and important DNA specimens – but our most important treasure was a greater understanding of the role of this palm in the lives and livelihoods of so many. As a vital source of shelter, food, drink, and craft, this palm is indispensable in these arid places.

I also find the Makalani Palm deeply compelling for its color, architecture, and beauty. As the seedlings I brought back grow and thrive I am filled with anticipation about how stunning they will look in the Montgomery garden – a sentiment shared by my friends in Geneva and Windhoek.

M. Patrick Griffith, MBC Executive Director  
[patrick@montgomerybotanical.org](mailto:patrick@montgomerybotanical.org)

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**Background:** An oasis of Makalani palms at Epupa Falls, Namibia, and Angola (background). Locals in the river area depend on the palms for shelter, food, drink, and craft.





We spent many days searching for palms at the exact perfect stage to make complete herbarium specimens.



The remoteness of the landscape prompted classic methods such as campfires to dry our specimens.



The Cunene River here borders Namibia (foreground)  
l on the palm fruits and also tap the palms to make wine.