

Montgomery Botanical NEWS

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Searching for
Sargent's
Cherry Palm
pages 6-7

Four New Discoveries
page 3

Colombian Cycads
pages 4-5



An Endangered Florida



Top: Tracy Magellan with one living *Pseudophoenix sargentii* and one dead trunk on Elliott Key.

Right: Tracy with the sailboat that carried her and her supplies to Elliott Key.



Sargent's cherry palm, *Pseudophoenix sargentii*, though found in many places in the Caribbean, is a Florida Endangered Species occurring only on Elliott Key in the USA. Located in Biscayne National Park, about 20 miles southeast of Montgomery Botanical Center between Biscayne Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, Elliott Key is the last Florida habitat where *P. sargentii* can be found.

No roads go to Elliott Key, so on the morning of February 11th we set sail near Key Largo for Elliott Key and took a five and a half hour trip to the island. The bay was calm, but the wind was coming from the northwest, so we motored most of the way against the wind. On the first day we landed, tested our GPS points, and found the first palm on the island in a region called Scorpion Bite. We were lucky not to find any scorpions on the site, but the mosquitoes were there ready to bite.

Palm

So near, yet so far

The *Pseudophoenix sargentii* habitat on the island is a hardwood hammock, with many species including poisonwood, gumbo limbo, Florida thatch palm, and white stopper. Though the Sargent's cherry palm is said to fruit from January through March, no fruit was found this February. This species is extremely slow growing and though there are young introduced and wild *P. sargentii* on the island, it will take a while before they mature.

Hurricane Sandy hit the key in October of 2012 destroying the seawall and harbor, causing the National Park Service to close Elliott Key for 18 months, just reopening in May of 2014. We do not know if the hurricane impacted the remaining adult *P. sargentii* which rise above the dense canopy, but in only 3 years' time the population has once again declined.

A group of South Miami Middle School students were on an educational campout on the key during our time on the island. The teacher and park rangers approached me to give an outreach presentation. They wanted the students to see that scientists are "real people," not just mythical types read about in textbooks and stereotypes portrayed on television. I was happy to tell the students about the Sargent's cherry palm and show them a specimen. It was the first *Pseudophoenix* they had seen on the island. Some recognized the distinctive palm, saying they had seen it in landscaping in town.



Above: Tracy Magellan speaking with 7th grade South Miami Middle School students who camped at Elliott Key.

The Sargent's cherry palm's striking blue grey color contributed to its overharvest throughout Florida and the Caribbean for use in landscaping. It is one of the most wind and salt tolerant palms with the ability to survive occasional salt water inundation, which contributes to its use in the landscaping of coastal regions.

Montgomery Botanical Center currently has five populations of *Pseudophoenix sargentii* in the collection, representing a good, but as of yet incomplete sample of the genetic diversity of the species.

I would like to thank the International Palm Society for supporting the expedition, the National Park Service for helping with permitting and logistics, and Jeremy Schnall for sailing me to the key.

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