Sabal Stories

A New Palm Species in the United States

Many years ago, as botany students at the University of Texas, Austin, Doug Goldman and I travelled to the South Texas coast. Doug was in search of a little-known palm that had puzzled botanists – it resembled a common *Sabal minor*, but had a tall, strong trunk – up to 30 feet! Perhaps only 300 of these mysterious palms grow in a humid bottomland forest among oaks and elms. Prior collectors made only a few specimens and experts called these 'robust dwarf palmettos.'

Doug and I prepared specimens, gathered samples, wrote extensive notes and took photographs. Doug also carefully analyzed the DNA at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew – the results suggested a new discovery!

Over the years, Doug and I each completed many other botanical projects – on orchids, cacti, grasses and cycads – while the *Sabal* remained an enigma. Last year, Doug, now with the USDA, led a group of experts to complete the study.*

Close examination revealed that these palms were a new hybrid species – *Sabal* × *brazoriensis* – resulting from what appears to be an ancient cross between *Sabal minor* and *Sabal palmetto*. Interestingly, although *Sabal mexicana* (see below) grows much nearer than *Sabal palmetto* to the 'Brazoria Palms,' our analysis shows *S. mexicana* was not involved.

It is exciting that these discoveries can still be made – quoting from the paper: "such work likely will reveal a number of surprises."

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*Goldman, D.H., M.R. Klooster, M.P. Griffith, M.F. Fay, & M.W. Chase. A preliminary evaluation of the ancestry of a putative *Sabal* hybrid (Arecaceae: Coryphoideae), and the description of a new nothospecies, *Sabal* × *brazoriensis*. Phytotaxa 27: 8–25.

The Last Natural Forest of *Sabal mexicana* in the U.S.

Tucked away at the very southern tip of Texas near Brownsville in one of the lowest loops of the Rio Grande is a very special 527-acre preserve containing the last natural stand of *Sabal mexicana* in the United States. That core *Sabal* forest is about 32 acres in size. The Audubon Society purchased the land and managed the property for several years, realizing the value of this natural *Sabal mexicana* palm forest.

The Sanctuary, now managed by the Gorgas Science Foundation, provides critical shelter and breeding habitat for many endangered or high-priority birds – and is among the last vestiges of original *Sabal* palm forest in the U.S.

Larry Noblick with *Sabal mexicana*

I obtained permission and collected a population sample of seed from the Sanctuary last October with my colleague Dr. Romeo Montalvo, of the South Texas Palm Society. Fruit production was down from previous years according to Romeo, because of two severe winters in a row and the long drought last summer, but with diligence, we managed to find five trees with mature fruit. The seed is being germinated and grown in the Montgomery greenhouse. We also made a dried specimen appropriate for future scientific studies, which was deposited at the FTBG herbarium along with duplicates to be deposited elsewhere.

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