Montgomery Botanical NEWS

Spring/Summer 2026 *Volume 34, Number 1*

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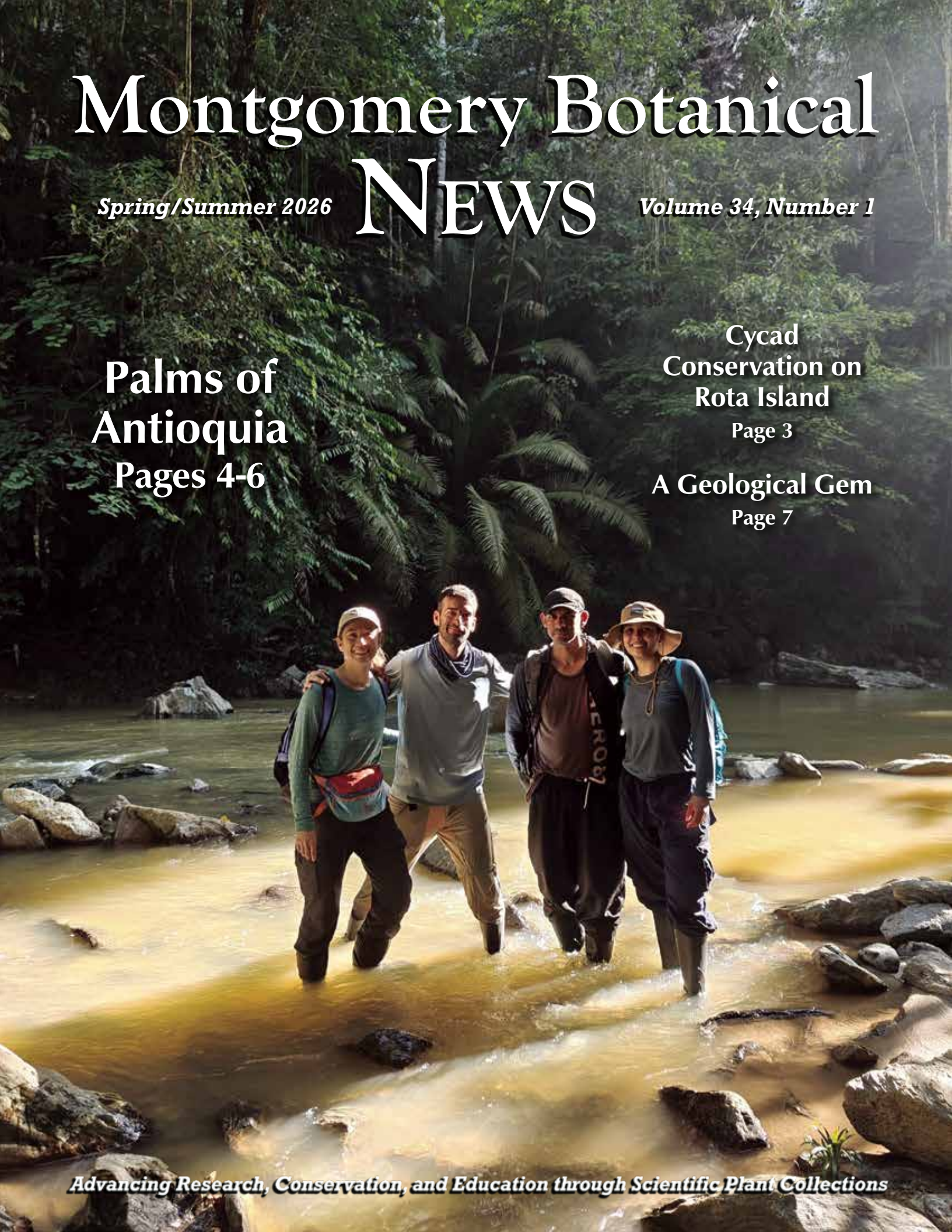

Advancing Research, Conservation, and Education through Scientific Plant Collections

To advance science, education & conservation of tropical plants, emphasizing palms and cycads, Montgomery Botanical Center grows living plants from around the world in population-based, documented, scientific collections in a 120-acre botanical garden exemplifying excellent landscape design.

Montgomery Botanical Center is a tax-exempt, nonprofit institution established by Eleanor "Nell" Montgomery Jennings in memory of her husband, Colonel Robert H. Montgomery, and his love of palms and cycads.

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From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

A year of amazing progress: refining our landscape, growing our plant collection, building our team, and moving botany forward! I am delighted to share these stories with you, items that show the many ways we advance research, education and conservation with our garden.

Dr. María José Sanín shares her fieldwork on pages 4-6. Even before she arrived in Miami, María negotiated the complex process of moving palm seeds from Colombia to Montgomery, and in less than a full year she has already brought us 22 species – *thirteen of these never before grown here* – from her explorations in Antioquia. These new living treasures give our leading palm collection even greater depth and breadth.

Our McBryde-Montgomery Fellow, Ben Deloso, shares a cycad conservation project on Rota Island, a remote part of Micronesia, on page 3. Our collaboration with the foresters from the Marianas is in turn mirrored by the collaboration among Florida International University, National Tropical Botanical Garden, and Montgomery, who partnered to support Ben's doctoral studies. Organizing around a common goal in this way grows everyone's outcomes even further. And each of these plants are incorporated into our landscape in a deliberate way. Page 7 shows the unique way we work with cherished ancient landforms to support careful cultivation of the rarest plants, and page 12 gives a view of how our landscape can change on a much shorter time scale.

All these successes are only realized because of your deep generosity! Pages 10 and 11 detail our growing family of supporters, and how we move our work ahead together. I remain very grateful!

Pictured: Dr. Griffith with the giant fruit of *Cocos nucifera* var. *palmyrensis*, on Palmyra Atoll.

On the Cover: Dr. María José Sanín and her team with *Phytelephas macrocarpa* in Maceo, Antioquia, Colombia (see pages 4-6).

Fadang - Fading No More

Cycas micronesica, locally known as "fadang" in the Mariana Islands, has been undergoing a conservation crisis for over 20 years. This cycad was once the most abundant tree species on the island of Guam. The invasion of cycad aulacaspis scale (CAS) on the islands of Guam and Rota prompted conservation action by the University of Guam and Montgomery Botanical Center, with Dr. Michael Calonje visiting these islands and collecting numerous seeds in 2007. Many of these seeds have grown into handsome plants at Montgomery and are a critical part in conserving the genetic diversity of this Pacific Island cycad.

Fieldwork for a project to assess the genomic diversity on Rota was recently completed. Dr. Griffith and McBryde-Montgomery Fellow Ben Deloso, in collaboration with local experts, followed in Calonje's footsteps, revisiting the same sites where he collected seeds and DNA specimens nearly 20 years ago to collect leaf samples from the remaining plants. These leaf samples will be used to re-assess genetic diversity across the island, with the ultimate goal to propagate genetically appropriate offspring to maximize resiliency. During their visit to Rota, Deloso and Griffith also toured the DLNR's rare plant nursery and exchanged tips on fadang propagation. These collaborative efforts will ensure fadang survival in these remote islands!

Ben Deloso, McBryde-Montgomery Fellow
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We thank the US Fish and Wildlife Service for funding this project, and the experts at the Department of Land and Natural Resources of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands for the invitation to collaborate on this work.

Right: Once a very numerous tree species on Rota, this rare cycad is now difficult to find on the island. Collaborative efforts from Rota's foresters and Montgomery's botanists are finding ways to bring it back.

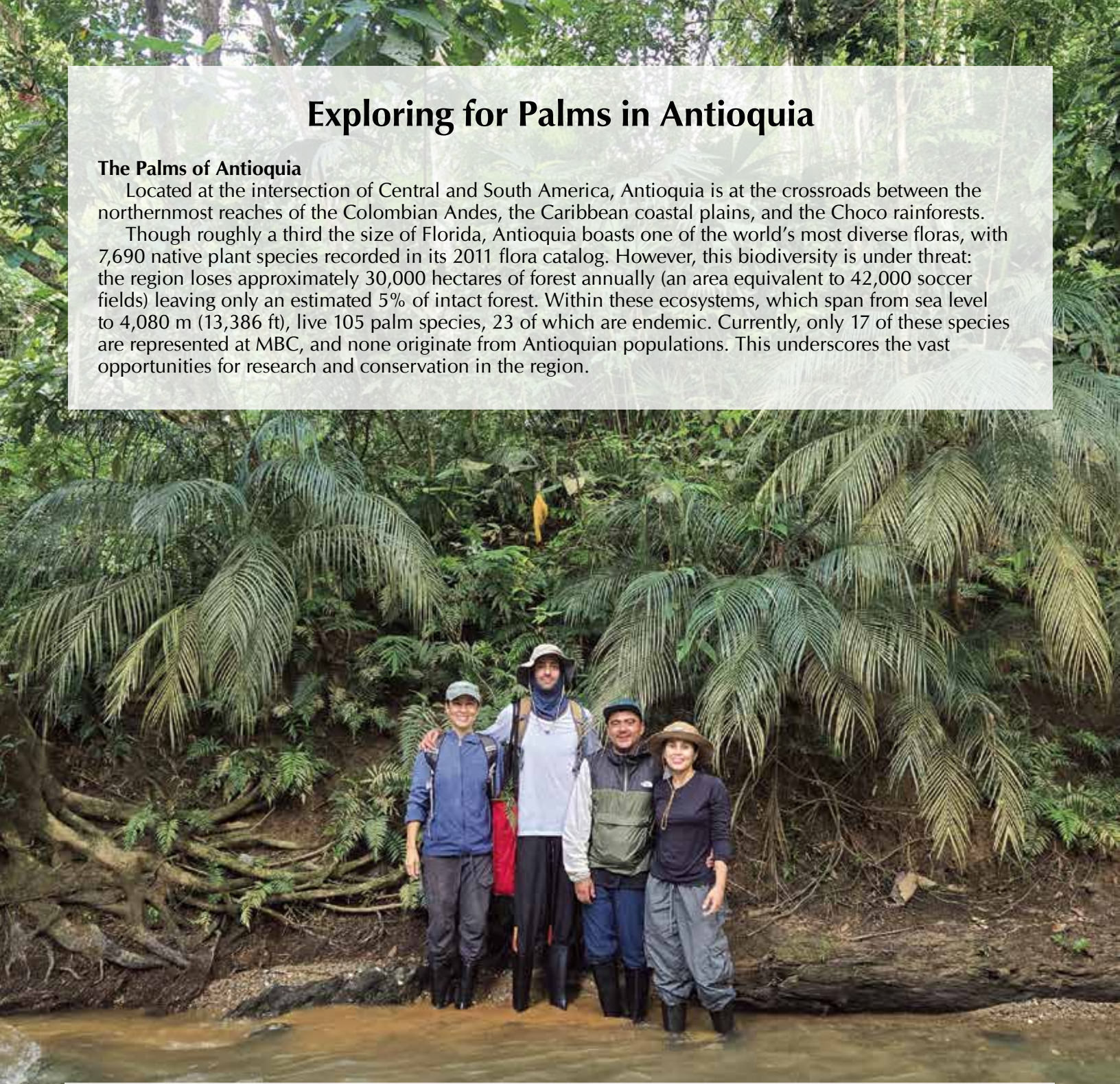
Below: The research team inspecting a healthy female fadang plant. Since the scale insect invasion, reproduction of fadang has been very limited, but recently surviving plants have begun to reproduce again, and even seedlings are sometimes observed.

Exploring for Palms in Antioquia

The Palms of Antioquia

Located at the intersection of Central and South America, Antioquia is at the crossroads between the northernmost reaches of the Colombian Andes, the Caribbean coastal plains, and the Choco rainforests.

Though roughly a third the size of Florida, Antioquia boasts one of the world's most diverse floras, with 7,690 native plant species recorded in its 2011 flora catalog. However, this biodiversity is under threat: the region loses approximately 30,000 hectares of forest annually (an area equivalent to 42,000 soccer fields) leaving only an estimated 5% of intact forest. Within these ecosystems, which span from sea level to 4,080 m (13,386 ft), live 105 palm species, 23 of which are endemic. Currently, only 17 of these species are represented at MBC, and none originate from Antioquian populations. This underscores the vast opportunities for research and conservation in the region.



Background: The team is composed of botanists Arturo Aristizabal (my MSc alumnus working on *Zamia* population genetics), Sara Carvalho and Camilo Gomez (both also my MSc alumni, working on palm population genetics and conservation). Maceo is located in the Magdalena Medio region of Colombia, an area of high palm endemism (i.e. *Astrocaryum triandrum*, *Chamaedorea ricardoi*) and very special topography defined by karstic cones where *Zamia incognita* populations thrive, in a matrix of acidic organic soils. Other interesting palm species in this region are *Cryosophila kalbreyeri*, *Oenocarpus bataua*, and *O. minor*, *Socratea exorrhiza*, *Wettinia hirsuta*, *Attalea butyracea* and *A. cohune*, *Astrocaryum malybo* and several species of *Aiphanes* in the parvifolia species complex.

This area needs urgent conservation action. In Camilo Gomez's MSc Thesis article (currently under revision) we found that it is this region that centers both the highest endemicity and threat scores in Colombia. The combined effects of logging for cattle grazing, illegal gold mining along rivers, and cement mining on the karstic cones, has put all of this biodiversity at high risk. This creek, the Alejandría, with its beautiful populations of riparian *Geonoma interrupta* and *Phytelephas macrocarpa*, was, at the moment of fieldwork, being illegally sand dredged in search of gold. Nevertheless, highly diverse forest fragments remain, where these palm and cycad species still thrive. We are currently working to establish ex situ collections for these species at Montgomery and in Colombia (Quindio Botanical Garden).

Expedition to Reserva Montés Samaná, San Carlos

Driven by a fascination with this diversity, I partnered with conservation managers at Reserva Montés Samaná in July to locate *Aiphanes leiostachys*. This endemic and threatened understory palm thrives along the small creeks of the Samaná River, the last major river in Antioquia yet to be dammed. The area also hosts *Aiphanes argos* and several other threatened palms. After navigating dirt roads, traveling by horseback, and hiking through riverbeds, we located a healthy population of *A. leiostachys*. We collected herbarium specimens and seeds, which are now at Montgomery and the Jardín Botánico de Quindío.

Observing the population firsthand revealed its fragility. Understory *Aiphanes* are unique; they flower infrequently, their seedlings are rare, and individuals tend to be scattered. Other notable species found in these humid Andean lowlands included *Asterogyne martiana*, *Geonoma interrupta* subsp. *rivalis*, *Oenocarpus bataua*, *Welfia regia*, and *Wettinia hirsuta*.

Cryosophila kalbreyeri

The Karstic Landscapes of Maceo

Following our time in San Carlos, we traveled through Medellín and to Maceo to meet Colombian botanists. We explored seasonally dry lowland forests situated on karstic outcrops. These are remnants of a marble strand formed millions of years ago when the area was submerged. We sought the endemic *Astrocaryum triandrum* and *Chamaedorea ricardoi*, as well as the spectacular *Cryosophila kalbreyeri* and *Phytelephas macrocarpa*. Although some of their fruit remained immature, *P. macrocarpa* has begun to grow in our nursery and in Quindío.

However, fieldwork is always more rewarding than you can anticipate. We collected seeds from *Zamia incognita*, an endemic cycad that forms dense, striking populations clinging to the karstic cliffs. Seeing such a high density of individuals in a localized area is a rarity in Colombia.

We concluded our journey by returning to Medellín, collecting *Attalea butyracea* fruits from palms remaining in pasturelands. These are now growing in our greenhouses and in Quindío.

Dr. María José Sanín, Ph.D., Palm Biologist
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From Left to Right: The new leaf of *Welfia regia* is bright red/purple. Infructescence and leaf of *Aiphanes leiostachys*.

Above: Population of *Zamia incognita* hanging from the sides and growing on top of the karstic rock outcrops.

Above: *Asterogyne martiana* in the lowland rainforest of San Carlos, Antioquia, Colombia. *Asterogyne martiana* palms have beautiful star-like female flowers, erect, branching inflorescences and long bifid leaves. They can be locally abundant but only do well in the deep shade of the rainforest understory. **Left:** *Attalea butyracea* on the way back to Medellín.

Above: Leaf of *Zamia incognita*

Geology Supports Botany at Montgomery

Montgomery Botanical Center is nearing its 100-year anniversary, but parts of its landscape date thousands of years back. One example of this is the Solution hole, a historic feature that we have not only preserved but have also utilized for our conservation collection.

Solution holes are naturally occurring features found in South Florida made by the slow drip of acidic water caused by decomposing plant material, or by continuous tidal changes that breakdown the softer material found in the limestone.

The stalagmites displayed here are the result of tidal changes over thousands of years, creating rows of horizontal patterns that line the walls of the solution hole. Fortunately for us, the natural formations left behind after the softer rock dissolved have also provided crevices and pockets, ideal for some of our wild collected cycads. Species like *Zamia cremnophila* and *Zamia meermanii* occur naturally on cliffs and caves with a similar rock composition, so using one of South Florida's natural features as a new home for these important specimens was an easy decision. The rock feature seems to also hold one or two degrees of extra heat during our coldest hours, which helps protect these ultratropical species.

This solution hole also provides a location of unique beauty and interest in the landscape, sited just off of the main lawn to the east of Nell's House. The site is also routinely used to teach geology to students of all ages and levels.

Naturally occurring among areas with deep vegetation, these solution holes once peppered South Florida, but have steadily been filled in as people continued to develop. Ironically enough, several plant species have become endangered due to habitat loss for the same reason, so having endangered plants protected in a scarce environmental feature make for an appropriate relationship.

Xavier Gratacos, Superintendent
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Research Update

Montgomery contributed to a paper featured on a recent cover of Science. Michael Calonje, our Cycad Biologist, is a co-author of the study, which was led by Wendy Valencia. Wendy recently graduated with her Ph.D. from Harvard, and travelled here often over five years to study our plants.

The research demonstrated that thermal radiation is an ancient pollination signal in cycads.

To get a paper accepted and printed in Science is a very high bar, indicating the highest quality research with broad reach and impact. Among those exceptional advances, to have such a paper featured on the cover is an amazing honor, demonstrating superlative work. High praise is very deserved! The paper was featured in news articles by The New York Times, National Geographic, Scientific American, and others.

Montgomery's mission is to advance research through its living plant collections, and this outcome is clear evidence that we are doing exactly that at the *highest possible level.*

Left: Dr. Wendy Valencia developed elaborate instrumentation to study how beetles interact with *Zamia* cones. **Right:** This cover image features an infrared photo of a cycad cone at Montgomery with a beetle gathering pollen.

Montgomery Botanical Center 2025 Collection Inventory

Each plant is planted in accordance with a diligent, annually refined landscape design, to promote beauty and tranquility. Each plant is obtained through a strategic vision, and each plant is available to support scientific study.

	Palms	Cycads	Other
Total Taxa	466	273	451
in ground	398	244	445
in nursery	128	65	15
Total Accessions	2,491	1,964	1,788
in ground	2,125	1,685	1,771
in nursery	416	316	19

	Palms	Cycads	Other
Total Plants	8,524	6,132	2,122
in ground	7,413	5,637	2,088
in nursery	1,111	495	34

16,778 Plants!
Wild collected plants: 81%

For more info see our website: montgomerybotanical.org

Team News We are glad to have a new group of interns in 2026. **Yanelis Valdes** came to Montgomery through Miami-Dade College's Horticulture Technology program. **Jaylon Smalls** is a horticulture student from Oregon State University. **Alexander Penciu** began volunteering last year, and has since continued interning at the garden while pursuing a masters degree from the University of Florida. **Emily Gannon** is our new FIU South Florida Sustainable Environments Intern developing a project on pollinators at MBC. **Joseph Mohr** (see below) was promoted from Conservation Horticulture Fellow to Assistant Curator.


Yanelis Valdes


Jaylon Smalls


Alexander Penciu


Emily Gannon

Conservation Horticulture & Contractile Roots

In August, as part of my Conservation Horticulture Fellowship, I worked in Montgomery's nursery. Much of the month was spent repotting seed-grown cycads, collected from the wild in recent years by MBC staff and associates. Working under the nursery canopy with a fan on full blast was a welcome reprieve from the heat of the Miami summer.

In November I returned to the nursery, and something caught my attention. Before I repotted the cycads, most, if not all, had been growing with their trunks underground. But pests are inevitable in horticulture and are more easily managed when the affected part of the plant is exposed, so I had placed them in their new pots with their trunks above the soil. By November, though, many of these young plants had somehow become buried again.

Caption: Two *Cycas cairnsiana* - the left one "burrowed" until its trunk was entirely covered, while the right one remained above ground.

It seemed to me that these cycads must have pulled themselves down into the soil. I wondered if cycads were known to use their roots to do this, so I looked online and found an article co-authored by none other than Patrick Griffith and Tracy Magellan. In 2014, working with Dr. P. Barry Tomlinson, they wrote about the evidence for contractile root tissue in *Cycas* and *Zamia*. How fitting that my curiosity had led me back to Montgomery!

Joseph Mohr, Assistant Curator
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Tracy Magellan

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Leonard Goldstein
Margaret & Serge Martin

Montgomery Botanical Center
Gratefully Acknowledges Your 2025 Support

Background: A January evening view of the Lowland Palmetum at Montgomery. This landscape is a long-term project, based on a continually-refined Master Plan from 1992. Your generous support of our Landscape Design Fund (see above, column 2) ensures that new plants from our explorations are incorporated into the garden in a deliberately pleasing manner.

Montgomery apologizes for any omissions or errors in accuracy.
Please see montgomerybotanical.org for more info.

Montgomery gratefully acknowledges your unrestricted contributions in 2025

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Florida Nursery, Growers & Landscape Association
International Garden Expo
South Florida Orchid Society
South Florida Palm Society

Plant Exploration Fund Travels *Even Further* in 2025

In November 2025, Dr. Lin Lougheed pledged to match $150,000 in donations to Montgomery's Plant Exploration Fund. Your generous giving soundly met Lin's challenge, and now Montgomery has surpassed *well over $1.3 Million* raised for this program since its inception in 2018. As seen in these pages, our team remains broadly active in exploring for, studying, and conserving plant diversity – all thanks to your amazing support! Lin adds, "I am heartened by the strong support of the MBC family to conserve and preserve our endangered plants for posterity. Under the thoughtful stewardship of Patrick Griffith, his team, and his international colleagues, MBC has earned an international reputation as a leader in palm and cycad exploration."

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FROM THE
MONTGOMERY ARCHIVE

Growth & Change in Three Decades

The Montgomery archive includes many photos of its collections in development. We gathered important collections of *Nypa fruticans* from Meru Betiri National Park in Jawa Timur, Indonesia nearly three decades ago. The two photos from 1997 show *Nypa* sprouting in the nursery, and in 2000, we planted young *Nypa* palms on the island on Duck Lake behind the Nixon Smiley Meeting Room. When you contrast these archive photos with the recent photo taken in February 2026, you can see how our garden has grown in a span of decades – the island is now completely covered with these unique branching palms, which are consistently used by educators and researchers. The palm seedlings were sited according to a deliberate landscape plan, which smartly anticipated their mature size and prominence in the lake.