

## Noted palm collection entrusted to Robinson Gardens

*Chamaedorea* is a group of about 120 species of small understory palms native in the American tropics from Mexico to Bolivia. Horticulturally, they are among the most important palms and are grown throughout the tropics and subtropics for landscape ornament. In addition, a few of them are extensively grown commercially as indoor plants for use in temperate regions. In fact, the parlor palm or *neanthe bella* is grown by the tens of millions in North America, Europe and the Orient and is the most popular palm for indoor use.

Chamaedoreas, or bamboo palms as they are commonly called, have several attributes giving them their popularity and warranting special merit for Southern California gardens. They have neat, green, bamboolike stems with graceful crowns of leaves that make them excellent specimens for tropical accent. The genus is blessed with amazing diversity and encompasses species having either solitary or clustering stems and simple and bifid or pinnate leaves, or any combination thereof. Being palms of the understory, they are small and tolerant of low light conditions and, in fact, are intolerant of direct sun. Coming mainly from tropical mountain forests, they are remarkably cold tolerant; most withstand the occasional light frost common to coastal areas. As long as they are watered, they are also tolerant of hot, dry conditions. Insects and pests are not particularly attracted to chamaedoreas.

A few, only about a dozen, chamaedoreas have been cultivated in Southern California since before the turn of the century. Unfortunately, the amazing wealth of horticultural diversity and potential in the genus has barely been tapped. Three years ago I began a project concerned with the culture and horticultural taxonomy of this diverse group of palms that holds such great potential for Southern California gardeners. I traveled to Panama, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Belize and Mexico to observe, photograph, and collect chamaedoreas for study and propagation and eventual introduction to cultivation. In addition, I traveled to Florida, Hawaii, and throughout California to view these palms in the landscape and nursery trade.

My efforts have been rewarded with the development of the largest, most important and valuable collection of living chamaedoreas in the



*Palms in the Chamaedorea genus display an amazing diversity of forms.*

world — about 75 species, all properly identified, named, and documented. All are initially grown in containers in our research facilities at the University of California.

As I wind up my research with each species, I plant them out at the Virginia Robinson Gardens in Beverly Hills, a facility of the Los Angeles County Department of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens. I selected this site as the repository for this important and valuable collection because of its frost-free location, excellent staff and support facilities, and proximity to my workplace. Here the collection is well maintained and continues to serve useful functions. For example, as they grow and develop in the garden, their usefulness as landscape subjects and ease of culture can be evaluated. Some are the only ones of their type in cultivation, and these plants will serve as mother blocks for seed propagation so the species can become well established in the trade. Others are very rare in the wild and with constantly diminishing habitat their existence at the garden serves as a conservation measure to avoid extinction and perpetuate the species.

The chamaedoreas at the Virginia Robinson Gardens constitute a unique, important, and valuable scientific collection that will long serve the horticultural community, gardeners, and nursery trade as a source of information and propagative material for trial and introduction to Southern California gardens.

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Hodel, Donald R. 1990. "Noted palm collection entrusted to Robinson Gardens." *Arboreta and botanic gardens : a publication of the Los Angeles County Department of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens* 2(3), 5.

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