Palm Hunting in South East Asia



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Introduction

Anja

While studying for the Diploma course at Kew, I had the exciting opportunity to work in the tropical display glasshouses, which ignited my passion for growing palms. In 2024 Tom and I travelled to South Florida to observe and work with palms in a subtropical climate. We made connections with horticulturists at Montgomery Botanical Center (MBC) and the wider palm growing circle in South Florida. I have since graduated from the Kew Diploma and am now working in the Tropical Nursery team at Kew to undertake the propagation for the Palm House ahead of its upcoming renovation. During this time of monumental change for the collections we have had the opportunity to review and determine areas where we can expand the palm collection. Since 2024 we have had plant donations from MBC and maintain a strong relationship with their team. Travelling to Singapore to attend the World Palm Symposium (WPS) has allowed for further opportunities to connect with palm experts across the globe and develop our skills in the propagation and cultivation of tropical palm species.

Tom

Through my studies at Kew in Tropical Horticulture followed by Kew's MSc in Food Security, I had the opportunity to travel, meet like-minded horticulturists, botanists and conservationists all working towards a common goal. The WPS was a continuation of these opportunities, which we were thrilled to take part in, as ultimately it is face-to-face interactions that drive these conservation efforts. Upon completing my studies, I started working in Therapeutic Horticulture, where ethnobotanical skill-sharing is a key part of my practice as a facilitator. The section of the symposium - Palms in Urban Landscapes - resonated deeply with me, as it is a way to bridge the gap between conservation awareness, science communication and engagement in every day urban life in London, where I live. It was inspiring to meet such diverse contingencies from across the world with whom we were able to make connections. Additionally, Anja and I then had the opportunity to experience conservation efforts in Malaysia protecting palm species, which gave us a valuable insight into palm habitats, morphological diversity and the opportunity to meet and stay with Orang Asli people of Endua-Rompin national park.

Aims and Objectives

- Improve our knowledge and skills in the cultivation and management of palms by observing and working alongside experts in palm horticulture while at Pasir Panjang Nursery and Singapore Botanic Gardens.
- Seek an enhanced understanding as to how palms can best be used in display horticulture by visiting several botanical gardens and other horticultural places of interest with the hope of gaining insight from those different settings.
- Learn how native palm species in their natural habitat may differ in growth habits from the same species growing at RBG Kew by undertaking a trip to the Endau Rompin Nature Reserve and observing species native to the Malay Peninsula.
- Build relationships with global palm experts through attending the WPS.
- Gain an understanding of the recent developments in palm taxonomy and research by attending lectures held at the WPS.

Itinerary

09.07.26 – Arrive at Singapore Changi Airport and visit Gardens by the Bay

10.07.26 – Visit Pasir Panjang Nursery, Singapore Botanic Gardens and Kent Ridge Park

11.07.26 – Rest day

12.07.26 – Herbarium specimen demonstration at Singapore Botanic Gardens

13.07.26-14.07.26 – WPS conference

15.07.26 – Visit Macritchie Treetop Walk

16.07.26 – WPS conference and conference dinner

17.07.26 – Visit Gardens by the Bay

18.07.26 – Palm seed sowing demonstration at Pasir Panjang Nursery, then travelling to Johor Bahru, Malaysia

19.07.26 – Travel to Kahang, Malaysia

20.07.26-21.07.26 – Visit the Endau Rompin Nature Reserve

22.07.26 – Travel to Singapore

23.07.26 – Visit Singapore Botanic Gardens' Seedbank, travel back to London Heathrow

Project Overview

The goal of the trip was to learn more about and observe palms through attending the WPS conference, visiting gardens in Singapore, and travelling through the rainforest in Malaysia. We also aimed to bring back some of the knowledge learnt to share with the team at Kew, as the Palm House renovation project is underway, so the collections are experiencing lots of changes and developments. We were keen to observe species native to the Malay Peninsula growing in their natural habitat, with over 50 species native to Singapore.

World Palm Symposium 2026

The Symposium kicked off with an excellent demonstration of how to take herbarium specimens of various palm species by Prof. Bill Baker, RBG Kew, and Dr Fred Stauffer, Geneva Botanic Garden. Palms provide botanists with numerous challenges when tasked with collecting specimens due to many factors including size, armoured stems and leaves, and inaccessible terrain. Therefore, it requires a skilled botanist to collect and mount palm specimens including all features of the plant to allow for later scientific use. It is also important to make notes on data that cannot be shown in the specimen, such as habitat type, precise location, specimen height, and surrounding flora, so that this can be added to the dried pressing of the plant. We then were tasked with taking what we had learnt and applying it to make a herbarium specimen of *Acoelorraphe wrightii*.



Figure 3 - Bill Baker holding a palm specimen from Singapore Botanic Gardens' Herbarium



Figure 2 - Acoelorraphe wrightii



Figure 1 - Our attempt at making a herbarium voucher of Acoelorraphe wrightii

Monday marked the first day of talks for the Symposium, with the day's theme being research in Systematics, Phylogenetics, and Evolution. Dr Renske Onstein gave the keynote address, on the ecology and evolution of palm-frugivores. Presentations included the use of genomic approaches to understand relationships within Arecaceae, the evolution of palm fruits, taxonomic revisions and the contribution of fossil evidence to understanding palm evolutionary history.



Figure 4 - Palms 2026 commencement

The second day of the conference focussed on long-term studies of palm populations, the ecological relationships between palms and frugivores, and the effects of environmental change and human activities on palm populations. The day concluded with an interactive workshop on establishing a Global Conservation Consortium for Palms, which addressed opportunities for international cooperation and coordinated conservation efforts.

On Wednesday field trips to Singapore Botanic Gardens, Gardens by the Bay, and Pasir Panjang Nursery were held. As we had already visited these places, we decided to take a trip to Macritchie Treetop Walk to spot some Singaporean native palms.



Figure 7 - Emerging palm frond, the reddish hue comes from anthocyanins, which give the delicate new leaves protection from the sun while they are still unfolding



Figure 5 - Rattan species reaching the top of the canopy, arrow indicating the flagellum, a structure with backwards pointed barbs to support the palm's climbing habit



Figure 6 - A fruit from a plant in Dipterocarpaceae. Dipterocarp comes from the Greek words di, pteron, and karpos meaning 2-winged fruit.

Thursday was another day of presentations focusing on palm conservation and sustainable use. Lectures were given on natural regeneration, genetic diversity, ethnobotany and the assessment of extinction risk in threatened palm species. A mini symposium was held on the ecology of understory palms, including population monitoring, morphological diversity, pollination ecology and species relationships. The day concluded with the conference dinner, providing an opportunity for further professional networking and discussion.

The final day of research presentations explored the geographical distribution, ecological patterns and evolutionary processes that have shaped palm diversity. Presentations covered the classification and biogeography of diverse palm groups, the ecological characteristics of palm fruits, the domestication of peach palm and the factors influencing species' geographical ranges. Dr Yuanshu Pu discussed the evolutionary consequences of past megafaunal extinctions for palms.

On Saturday 18th July we attended a palm seed sowing workshop at Pasir Panjang Nursery held by Zaki Jamil. The workshop covered seed preparation, sowing techniques, and the transplantation and care of young seedlings. Zaki sows all his palm seeds in a growing mix of 50% coarse sand, 50% coir, and has a very high success rate.



Figure 8 - Adonidia dransfieldii infructescence



Figure 9 - Cleaned Adonidia dransfieldii seeds



Figure 10 - Adonidia dransfieldii seeds sown in 50/50 sand/coir

Endau Rompin Nature Reserve

We met with our tour guide Adlil Ikram Shruddin of Nature Escape and Discovery Johor, and registered with the tourism body to go into Endau Rompin. Registered guides are a legal requirement for entering certain areas of Malaysia's nature reserves, and with good reason: Endau Rompin is a vast landscape, with rivers and different ecological habitats at different elevations. One of the habitats we were keen on visiting was the Palm Forest, filled with *Livistona endauensis* (Endau fan palm), an endemic species that grows uniquely on exposed sandstone plateaus and ridges. This involved a couple of hours of climbing; on our ascent we observed *L. endauensis* changing from a scattered understory palm to a dominant canopy palm.



Figure 13 - Fruit of a Salacca palm



Figure 11 - Selaginella wildenowii

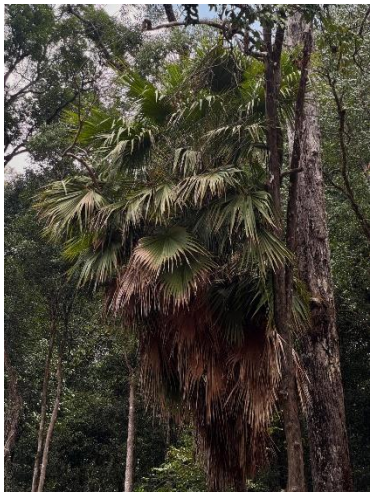


Figure 12 - Livistona endauensis

During our time in Endau Rompin, we stayed in a village with the local Orang Asli people who are the native people of this part of Malaysia. We stayed with our hosts who showed us local uses of palms, including *Johannesteijsmannia* leaves for house and roof building, rattans for traditional basket making and other domestic items, and we also tried betel nut, which is commonly consumed in social settings.

Adlil gave us lots of insights into different ways the local people use the plants found in the forest, such as burning the leaves of *Mesua ferrea* to scare elephants away from eating their food – the leaves make loud cracks when burned. He also showed us how they use large buttress roots to communicate through the forest, by hammering them with stones in a similar manner to morse code.



Figure 14 - Waterfall at the top of the palm trail



Figure 15 - A young Livistona endauensis



Figure 16 - Striped Jay butterfly, Graphium bathycles

Singapore Botanic Gardens

Singapore Botanic Gardens is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, home to over 10,000 species of plants within the 200 acres of gardens. We had the opportunity to tour the gardens with Zaki Jamil and again with a group of palm enthusiasts attending the conference.



Figure 18 - Licuala distens



Figure 17 - Licuala cordata



Figure 19 - Johannesteijsmannia altifrons



Figure 20 – Stilt-like roots of the walking palm, Socratea exorrhiza



Figure 21 - Heterospathe califrons



Figure 22 - The Coco de Mer, or double coconut, Lodoicea maldivica

Singapore Botanic Gardens have mature female specimens of *Lodoicea maldivica*, holding fertilised seed. The seed of the Coco de Mer is the largest in the plant kingdom, and takes 6-10 years to mature.

Gardens by the Bay

We visited Gardens by the Bay twice over the course of our time in Singapore, first to see the glasshouses and light display in the evening, and on our second visit we walked around the garden and went up the OCBC Skyway.



Figure 25 - View of Copernicea baileyana from the Skyway



Figure 23 - Fruit of the cannonball tree, Couroupita guianensis



Figure 24 - View from the Skyway

Conclusion

We gained so much valuable insight and knowledge on our trip, and we are keen to be able to share this with colleagues at Kew, and the wider horticultural community through talks, reports and social media. With grateful thanks again to the institutions who generously provided the funds to make this trip possible.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Budget Breakdown

Item	Cost
Air fare	£2678.18
Accommodation	£1263.90
Car Hire + Uber	£193.56
Fuel	£56.34
Food	£516.61
Public Transport	£115.54
Conference Tickets + 5 night accommodation	£1507.78
Required Vaccinations	£400
Malaysian Tour Guide, Rainforest collection and drop off	£558.29
Garden Entries	£35
Total	£7325.20
Bursary	Amount
RHS	£5000
Merlin Trust	£1000
Tresco	£1000
Personal Contribution	£325.20