

Foreword

Luis González-Camino Santander, March 2023

My friend Juan Carlos Sanz-Briz has asked me to preface this book. He must have thought I was some kind of expert on them. But no, I am just a passionate admirer. The whole plant kingdom is for me a huge bazaar where I can enjoy the immense variety and beauty, often very surprising, of plant forms, and at very different scales and sizes. And not only for their own characteristics, size, color, texture, shape, structure, smell, etc., but even more, for their role in the landscape of which they are not only part, but often dominate. The plant in its environment and the environment constituted by the grouping of plants.

Among all the higher plants, one group is distinguished by having a single point through which to grow, which makes them tremendously original. These are the palms. The shape of their crown seems to be an attempt to compensate for the impossibility of growing in all directions by growing very large leaves called palms, which all gather around the single bud called palmito, from which they were born. As if it were an inexhaustible and green artificial fire, from this center the palms grow upwards, withdrawing outwards and downwards to make room for their successors while, slowly, the palm tree rises towards the sky accompanied by the crown that sprouts from it and lengthens the trunk, thus gaining height year after year until reaching sixty meters in some species such as the wax palm. This trunk, or rather shaft, has in many cases a thickening at the base where it rests as a base and another below the top called capital where the cup rests. These names are taken from the parts of a column and it is natural because after all they are like the architectural ones, thin vertical supports of great height. Only that what they support are living palms and not beams or inert ribs and in contrast to the former, they allow themselves to be gently bent by the wind and often do not mind growing curved. Two thousand eight hundred species of palms inhabit our planet, almost all of them in the tropics. With this list, it is easy to imagine the enormous variety of shapes, sizes, colors and habitats they inhabit. Even so, it is not surprising that there are palms over sixty meters high, such as the aforementioned wax palm, or climbing palms such as the Calamus.

The use that man has made of palm trees throughout their area of distribution is also astonishing. We are all familiar with coconuts, dates, palm oil and Palm Sunday palms, but it is important to know that many species produce a wide variety of products such as palm wine, wax, fabrics, ropes, raffia, vegetable hair, wood, etc., etc., etc. In many places, they have helped and in some cases made possible the survival of human groups throughout the centuries. They are "the princes of the plant kingdom" as Linnaeus called them. I would like to think more for its beauty than for those other utilitarian attributes.

Several species could be cultivated in our city and it is worth making the effort to increase its catalog, which today is reduced to half a dozen, some of them present in this book. Among the species that can be found in Santander, the most abundant, representative and most closely linked to our history and our imagination is undoubtedly the Canary Island palm (*Phoenix canariensis*). This palm seems to have found in our land a paradise even more suitable to grow than in its native islands, to the point that some Canary Islanders have even told me, not without some envy, that here they were happier and more vigorous than in their own land. It also has a historical charge here, being associated with the epic of our countrymen of remote times, and not so remote, who ventured across the ocean to make their way in another hemisphere and try to make their fortune there. Some of them, not many, after succeeding, wanted to return to La Montaña. These Indians brought with them their wealth and the nostalgia of the years they spent there, and to remember them they planted here the tree that was most similar to the one available at the time and that could best evoke those lands: *the Canary Island palm tree*. Two of my great-grandparents did so in Santander. In a city, undoubtedly marvelous in many other ways, but lacking the arboreal heritage it deserves and as its climate would allow, the exception are the palm trees of which we have a good number, many of them extraordinary specimens. For reasons worthy of investigation, they have been spared the neglect and even the aversion of which many other trees in Santander have been victims. They can be seen around the city, their solitary plumes peeking over rooftops, trimmed against party walls or against the sea, parading in groups along avenues and promenades, framing palaces, or under the canopy of other taller trees, but always erect, dignified, almost solemn and always beautiful. The plague of the red palm weevil, which has been killing thousands of palm trees in Spain for years, has already reached our region and our city, again due to the negligence of those who should and could have prevented it. Miguel Soler-Roig and Juan Carlos Sanz-Briz have succeeded in this book in showing us, even those of us who never miss a chance to contemplate these extraordinary beings, a new and very original way of looking at them that increases our love and admiration for them. Let us hope that it will never become the testimony of a lost treasure.