

ME AND MY QUEEN PALM

WANTED: *Cocos plumosa*, a.k.a. *Arecastrum romanzoffianum*, a.k.a. *Syagrus romanzoffiana*. Sometimes answers to the common name of Queen Palm. Call Jim at 1-555-555-3241.

I saw the above classified in a landscape and gardening magazine a while back. It reminded me of my first encounter with the elegant Queen Palm.

I vividly recall when I was 10 years old and came upon the lavish pile of orange fruit that had dropped from the Queen Palm in our backyard. Without any nudging from any adult, I diligently planted every single one into some old pots that my uncle had been saving for some future project. (I gained his permission first, of course.) *Cocos plumosa* was the first official botanical name I ever learned.

Some fifty years later, I gaze up at the tall, robust specimens lining my sister's driveway. They were a gift from me to her and to this day, I still think they are the healthiest palms I have ever seen. But I am faced with a dilemma. With my hand patting the sturdy trunks, I simply don't know how to

tell these fine palms that they are suffering from an identity crisis. All of those fine cousins with shared heredity are only a mirage. What's more, I am not certain I can reassure them that their new kin will still be their kin ten years from now. And so, the question growing in my mind is, 'Why'?

Plant taxonomy is a science, of course. Those engaged in its field have spent a good part of their life and their money achieving the standing of plant taxonomist. It has certainly come a long way since Linnaeus first began the endeavor. I will grant that the more sophisticated science has become, the more it can distinguish between plants. But the sometimes-turbulent disagreement in the inner circle of plant taxonomy fosters a seed of cynicism within the mind.

Plant taxonomy has the function of finding, describing, classifying, identifying, and naming plants. An allied field, called "plant systematics" is concerned with the relationships between plants and their evolution (red flag word and the subject of a whole other weeding session). To a layman, the distinction between the two is blurry.

What variation in classifying systems are there? Pick your flavor—we have the APG, APG II, APG III, Bessey, Cronquist, Melchior plus a dozen or so less tenured entities. I couldn't tell you what the differences are. It would require

someone with fewer weeds in their mind than me. Plant taxonomy is certainly important in an orderly world. There can be a dozen different common names for the same plant, depending on where you live in the world. If I were to call someone in Australia and mention my Queen palm, it would be good to give its botanical name too, so we would be on the same page (of course, I don't know anyone in Australia to call). I just hope I never have to call someone in Australia and talk about the pothos plant on my back porch. This poor “pothos” plant (currently, still *Epipremnum aureum*) has had over 20 different scientific names in its lifetime. Some of these old names are just discarded, and no longer considered valid. They keep others on the books and list them as synonyms for the new name. If I were to try texting and include all the names, I might have to take out a loan for data usage charges.

Perhaps the thing to do is find a comfortable lounge chair underneath a live oak tree with a lemonade in hand and give less serious thought to the matter. It is in such a setting that my overly fertile mind can wander into a little room deep within the bowels of a laboratory complex.

Seven lab coated men sit around a table waiting for their boss to appear. Dr. Zeckle enters with a commanding stride, carrying the assignments for the day.

"Gentlemen," the exalted scientist bellows. "There are no new specimens to examine today. Therefore, it behooves us to look to existing subjects for our day's work. Wimbush, I want you to go back and reclassify and rename *Arecastrum romanzoffianum*."

"But, sir," Wimbush objected. "We did that one a few years ago."

"Are you defying me, Wimbush?"

"Oh, n ... n ... no, no sir," Wimbush stammers. "I couldn't. I wouldn't."

"If you are, may I remind you that Igor is dying to come to life at the first vacancy in our little group. As for the rest of you, here are your assignments."

"Yes, sir," they all replied in unison.

As he walked back to his office, Dr. Zeckle laughed loudly as he proclaimed, "They are mine. Ha! Ha! The entire world is mine. They are powerless to resist my manipulation of their minds. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

I know. I know. I've got to stop reading my Far Side collections.

I also know that, if I were at a party, and the guy I was talking to made a comment about the Queen Palm in the backyard, I could reply with some remark about the *Cocos plumosa* being a graceful tree. That would sound impressive enough, but if I said, " You mean the *Cocos plumosa*, a.k.a. *Arecastrum romanzoffianum*, a.k.a. *Syagrus romanzoffiana*", it could cause severe stress on his part being in such erudite company.

The question then becomes, "Should we, as the planters and tillers of the soil, even care?"

We should, of course, to a point. What do you think?

Now that I've cleared my mind of this weed completely (unless there are dormant seeds deeply buried), I will seek the company of my Queen Palm on this sultry summer evening. With my hand resting on its sturdy trunk, I will be content in being a peasant in the hierarchy of plant taxonomy and watch the setting of the fiery orange Florida sun.

