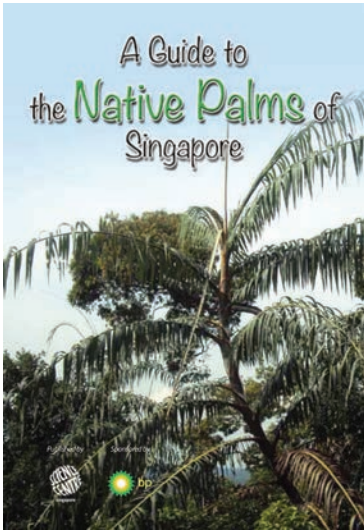


BOOK REVIEW: A Guide to the Native Palms of Singapore. Adrian H.B. Loo, Ang Wee Foong, William J. Baker & Hugh T.W. Tan. 2014.

Singapore: Science Centre. 15 cm × 10.4 cm, card cover. 176 pp. ISBN 978–981–07–8878–0. Price SGD 7.90.



What a fine little book! Diminutive in size (fits easily into the pocket of a bush jacket, although that really is not required in much of Singapore!), concise in its writing, and well-conceived in its coverage, this Guide must do more than any other in the same time spent perusing it.

Singapore is an island nation and it can be quite astounding how rich its natural vegetation is, despite the intensive waves of change it has weathered. For some time now, the most ardent of Singaporean naturalists have been actively promoting the value of the native flora and joining them today are an entire community of nature lovers very much into understanding more of what this inherently *rich* island has. And now we have our handy guide to Singapore palms. Palms do not fail

to captivate because of their unique form, yet there is a huge diversity with over 2500 species worldwide.

Palms are generally thought of as large plants; a botanist who collects from a tall tree palm has few means of obtaining truly representative specimens and in time takes home nothing short of trophies. The spiny palms, especially the climbing ones called *rotan* in Malay (‘rattans’), some of which drape the most majestic of rainforest trees even, have attracted only the bravest and most stubborn of students. No doubt, the universal appeal of palms has stemmed from displays in botanical gardens, augmented by some use in landscaping and street planting. The myriad ways in which palms are useful to tropical communities are legend. The palms contributing much public appeal are those that thrive in open, exposed sites and which are therefore more amenable to cultivation. Thus, building up an interesting diversity of such palms brings with it both awe and envy because of the increasingly demanding space requirements.

But the other side of the challenge is much less visible or understood. In the rainforest regions of the world, the understorey palms abound, many of which can only survive with sufficient shade, humidity and particular soil conditions. And many must be disappearing with forest conversion and fragmentation. Conserving such species is always best achieved with their natural habitat, although few public gardens have ventured into presenting forest understorey palms as a conservation exhibit, or developing conservation collections to any meaningful extent. There are a number of smaller pot palms that have found their way from the shade of the rain forest, but the true diversity of form and elegance in forest palms is a remarkable one.

This Guide is a good and handy primer. The first 39 figures are numbered for easy reference in the general chapters (Introduction, Economic Importance of Palms, Palm Characteristics, Why Study Palms in Singapore?) but not the rest of the illustrations which, placed with their respective taxa, are still easily referred to. Table 5 lists the 54 species of native Singapore palms, with 12 thought to be locally extinct. The species are introduced via three groupings: the feather (pinnate-leaved) palms, fan palms, and mostly climbing, scaly-fruited rattan palms, their distinctive form and habit constituting the most logical presentation. The book is the 47th in the Singapore series sustained so well by the Science Centre Singapore with the support of BP Singapore Pte Ltd.

K.M. Wong

Singapore Botanic Gardens