



COLLECTIONS NEWS

Planting History

MANY LAYERS OF HORTICULTURAL history make up the plant collections at Lotusland. The first layer was put down when Ralph Kinton Stevens and his wife Caroline bought the property in 1882. Named “Tanglewood” for the numerous native oaks that were already on the property, Stevens quickly became interested in plants of economic and horticultural value — especially citrus and palms. He was the first nurseryman in California to offer a catalog solely dedicated to tropical and subtropical plants and is credited with introducing Indian lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*) and nine varieties of palms.

Stevens wrote, “Palms are among the finest and handsomest of all plants and my collection contains all the best and hardiest varieties adapted to Southern California.” He offered 50 different palms for sale with many of them being tested in the landscape at “Tanglewood.” In his introduction to the catalog he states, “I can speak with some knowledge on the subject of their growth, habits, etc., as they have developed here.” Some of the oldest plants on the property are the

remnants of these original palms planted by Stevens.

One of Stevens’ greatest legacies is the 40 mature Chilean palms on the property, the oldest being the two that tower over the Sycamore Canyon gate. It is interesting to think that Stevens would have never imagined that his plants would later become some of the most prominent plants at a world-renowned botanic garden.

Photographs from Stevens’ time give insight into the locations of some of the oldest plants that remain in the collections today. Stevens’ house stood in the area that is currently the fern garden and his trial garden was the area that encompasses what is today the dragon tree (*Dracaena draco*) forest, with his immense *Dracaena draco* in the center. Upon further examination of the images, one can identify many of the palms that are now some of the largest



LEFT: *Dracaena draco* TOP RIGHT: Chilean palms at Sycamore Canyon Gate BOTTOM: Stevens' catalog

of their kind. Recognizable in the photos are the *Washingtonia* palms that are now towering over the area – the *W. filifera* near the dormitory and the *W. robusta* at the edge of the Palmetum. An immense Canary Island date palm (*Phoenix canariensis*) and Chilean palm (*Jubaea chilensis*) in this part of the garden are also visible in the early photos.

The plants that originated during the Stevens era are many and also include the massive bunya-bunya (*Araucaria bidwillii*) trees, the hoop pine (*A. cunninghamii*) in the blue garden and Norfolk Island pine (*A. heterophylla*) in the Japanese Garden, which were all offered in his catalog. In the Japanese Garden there is a Torrey pine (*Pinus torreyana*) that surely rivals the age of the historic Wardholme Torrey pine in Carpinteria, planted in 1888.

Many of these old plants are beginning to decline from age. Two years ago, we had to remove Stevens’ most iconic tree due to failing health – the 130-year-old Monterey cypress (*Hesperocyparis macrocarpa*) that dominated the vista of the great lawn. In planning for the next 130 years, a seedling grown from the venerable original tree was planted in its place and is now 12 feet tall. — Paul Mills

