

The Genus *Acanthophoenix*

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The palm genus *Acanthophoenix* dates from the year 1867, when Hermann Wendland named two palms from the Mascarene Islands, previously known as *Areca crinita* and *A. rubra*, as *Acanthophoenix crinita* and *A. rubra*, respectively (in FL. DES SERRES 16: 181, pls. 1706-7. 1867.). Today, these handsome plants, known under cultivation as Barbel Palms, are relatively frequent inhabitants of our gardens and palmetums, where the statuesque beauty adds greatly to the landscape. In their juvenile forms, they are perhaps even more popular, because of the tinged fronds. As yet, only the two species are known to science. They are allied to the genus *Deckenia* Wendl. ex Seem., from the Seychelles Islands, and belong to the tribe *Areceae*.

The generic characters for *Acanthophoenix* are as follows: Slender pinnate erect solitary palms to 60 feet high, with ringed spineless trunks. Leaves very long and graceful, arching or with the lower ones almost pendulous; pinnae close together, long, narrow, strongly nerved and with a prominent midrib, in the juvenile plants red—(*A. rubra*) or yellow-veined (*A. crinita*), and very attractive; leaf sheaths more or less spiny. Spathe thin and papery, consisting of two parts (valves), deciduous on maturity. Spadix robust, two-branched, with strongly pendent rachillae of very numerous flowers that are set closely together; stalk more or less spiny. Flowers unisexual, red-purple, white, yellow, or pinkish, fragrant; usually one pistillate flower borne under two staminate ones, the latter larger in size; staminate flowers with prominent white anthers, spreading; pistillate flowers scarcely opening, bud-like in appearance, almost globular; sepals and petals 3. Fruit about 1/2 long, globose, hard, black.

The Red Barbel Palm, *Acanthophoenix rubra*,⁶ is a slender, erect species to as much as sixty feet in height. The singularly handsome young specimens have prominently red-veined fronds. The mature leaves reach a length of about twelve feet; they are gracefully arching, and bear some bristly spines on the lower midrib of each pinna and on the leaf-rachis itself. The basal sheath is conspicuously covered with black spines. The numerous, linear-lanceolate pinnae are 2-pointed at the apex, and lighter in color beneath than on the upper surface. The spathes subtending the inflorescence of *A. rubra* reach a length of almost two feet, and are often furnished basally with a few black spines. The spadix is about three feet long, with some short rigid spines at the base, and has the rachillae more or less straight and densely many-flowered. The pistillate flowers are hidden by the much more abundant staminate ones, and are interspersed among them. The staminate blossoms have reddish-purple petals and much shorter, smaller, whitish sepals. The almost globular fruits which measure about one-half inch in diameter, are shiny black in color. This attractive palm inhabits Reunion Island in the Mascarenes, and formerly existed as well on nearby Mauritius, but according to recent authorities, is probably extinct in the latter area.

The Yellow Barbel Palm, *Acanthophoenix crinita*, is similar to the other species, *A. rubra*, in general habit, but when young has yellow-green fronds; it is also, in most instances, somewhat less robust in appearance. The leaf-petioles of *A. crinita* are fuzzy, bear a few slender spines at the sheathing base, and are not as wide as those of the other species. Both spathe and spadix are shorter than in *A. rubra*; the spadix has a few rigid spines to about eight inches long near the base, and

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its rachillae are rather crooked. The staminate flowers have white, yellow, or pinkish petals, and sepals which (as in the other species) are noticeably shorter. The pistillate blossoms measure about one-

quarter inch in length when mature. The more or less oblong fruit is about one-half inch in length, rather irregular in shape, and black in color. This handsome palm inhabits both Mauritius and Reunion Islands, in the Mascarene group.

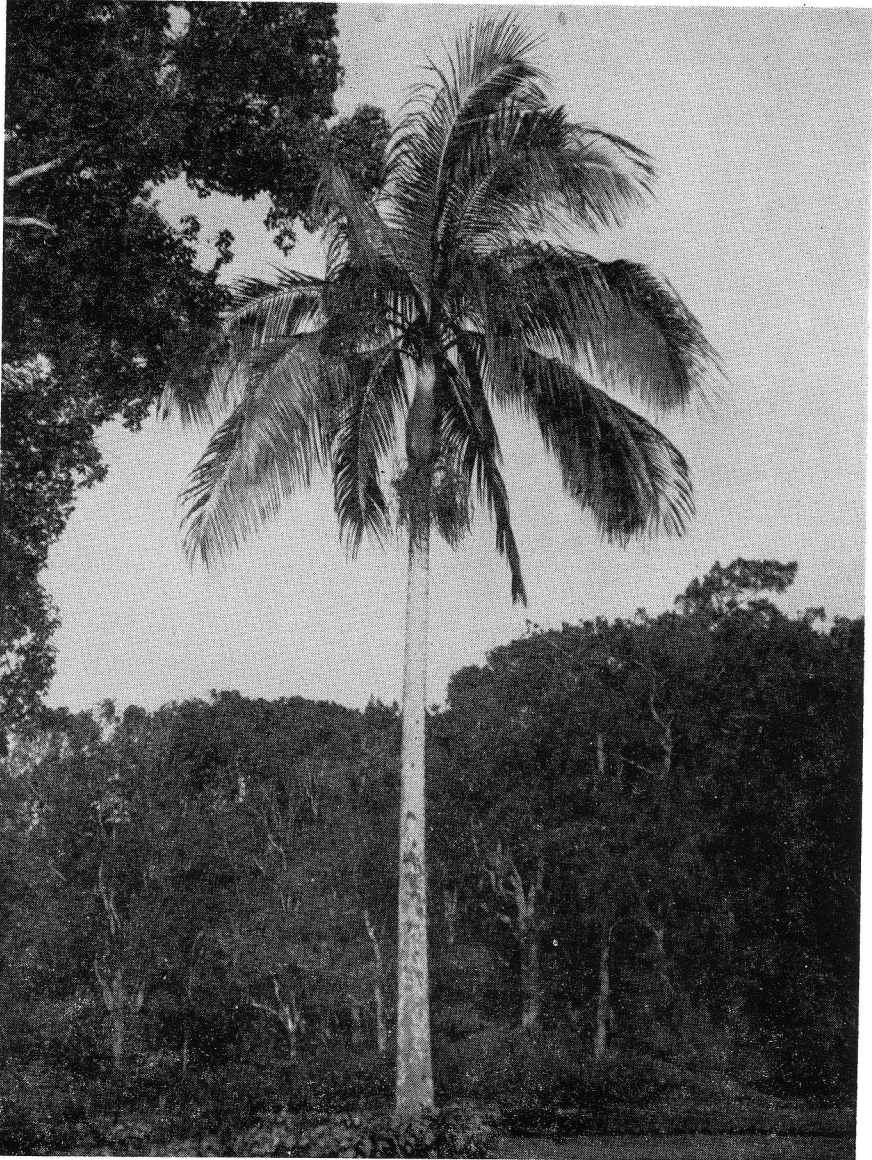


Photo by R. E. VAUGHAN

Acanthophoenix crinita, Mauritius, where it is native (Fig. 69, *Gent. Herb.* VI, 1942).