

Two Gardens, One Passion

By Daniel Lewis, Lomita, CA

For those who were unable to attend the July meeting of the Palm Society of Southern California, my few words will certainly fail to provide an adequate impression of either garden. Of course, one could volunteer for any of the open positions on the Board of Directors and contact the Riedlers or the Asbaghs for a followup interview and/or photo session "for The Journal" - a trick I've successfully used on at least two occasions.

As luck would have it, I was flying blind - without a camera, that is. To further compound the issue, my carpool buddy formatted his digital camera for the maximum number of images, thereby rendering each image essentially useless for reproduction purposes. (Note to all prospective Palm Journal contributors: set your digital camera for the maximum number of bytes per image.) Regardless, the first garden we visited belongs to Valerie and Mark Riedler. Planted on a hillside in Encinitas, the garden provides a wonderful tableau of suitable companion plants to showcase any palm collection in Southern California. They combined succulents, cycads, ferns, aroids, and bromeliads, plus several tropical flowering trees creating a lush harmony of form, color and texture.

Then there were the palms. I found it amusing to watch folks gather around certain palms according to taste. A cluster eventually formed around the two *Wodyetia X Veitchia* 'Foxy Lady' hybrids, while next to the pool, a group of admirers formed around one of the larger *Wallichia disticha* specimens in Southern California. The Riedler garden is a good example of using topography for maximum display advantage. While their hillside was not terribly steep, they used paths and steps to create several terraced levels, with many different viewpoints.

After losing our way (and nearly losing my mind), we arrived at the garden of Maria and Greg Asbagh. I first laid eyes on the Asbagh garden over a year and a half ago. A friend pointed out an image of a lush tropical paradise in Sunset Magazine and explained he wanted to create a similar effect in his own garden. In the article, they named the owner - I knew him as the webmaster of Spectre's Jungle (now Tropicsphere), a web forum dedicated to the worship of tropical flora. I contacted Greg and arranged a visit.

Upon arrival, Greg began ranting about the futility of trying to grow anything even remotely tropical in California - his garden had been hailed upon and frosted (this was soon after The Big Freeze); eventually, he regained his composure and gave us the tour. In spite of the odd hail-mutilated bromeliad, his garden was quite spectacular - even before some of the planned features had been completed.

Fast forward to July 2008 - The Big Freeze was a distant memory (kept alive only through the tireless efforts of our dedicated Palm Journal staff). The Asbagh garden was complete, more or less - as complete as any garden, I imagine. The paths



Above - Mark Riedler's *Ravenea rivularis* towering above the other plants in his garden (Larry Black).

Below - Mark standing next to the most popular palm in his garden, a *Wallichia disticha* (Larry Black).



Right - A view of the spectacular pool area at the Asbagh garden (Larry Black).

Below - Greg and Maria Asbagh smiling in front of one of the many lush areas of their garden (Larry Black).



winding throughout created the impression of tremendous space, though the garden was crammed with plants - 'crammed' in the good sense. With the well-established canopy overhead, I half expected to see a toucan or hear howler monkeys singing. The importance of canopy was made evident by the flawless *Dypsis lutescens* flanking the driveway; I had never seen them look so good outdoors in Southern California. Greg was holding court on the back patio deck - this time, ranting about all the wonderful tropical plants one can grow here.

Both the Riedler and Asbagh gardens appear to be the result of meticulous planning, but with distinctly different effects. It's always interesting to observe the development of a garden over time, and I hope the Palm Society is invited for a return visit. If not, I can always rely on the old 'followup article' trick.





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