

BOOK REVIEW

JONO MILLER. 2021. **The Palmetto Book**. (ISBN-13: 978-0-8130-6680-6, hbk). University Press of Florida, 2046 NE Waldo Road, Suite 2100, Gainesville, Florida 32609, U.S.A. (**Orders:** upress.ufl.edu). \$28.00 US, 312 pp., black and white photos, notes, index, 6¼" × 9½".

To find out why Jono Miller wrote about *Sabal palmetto*, known as the cabbage palm in Florida, and the palmetto in South Carolina, you must read the introduction. Reading it also reveals why he wrote it as a biographical narrative, rather than using the more typical terminology in scientific species descriptions.

As an encyclopedic biography of the cabbage palm, he presents it as a poster child for the study of botany. Using anecdotal histories to back up this palmetto's seemingly conflicting characteristics, he has written *The Palmetto Book* as a detailed biography of a famous person, about whom many fables and tales have been written. It is written by a loving student who does not want to lose any part of his mentor's attributes or importance.

As you read, you realize that facts and terminology are being placed in your memory as a story, rather than being categorized by topic or term. Miller uses narrative to spin the data into threads of knowledge and blends them with beautiful historical yarns, weaving it all into an amazing fabric of botanical study.

Miller's descriptions of characteristics of *Sabal palmetto* let the reader get to know almost everything that is known about that one species. He believes this slow, detailed but enjoyable story is a better way to learn about plants in the environment than "speed-dating" the characteristics of many different species.

An example of his many lessons is that the growth of the cabbage palm is different from other *Sabal* species. They need a long time below ground to germinate and develop a root structure to support its eventual rapid growth. The result is a broad root base from which a narrower trunk emerges and grows tall very quickly. If sufficient resources are available, the trunk may even be of a larger diameter near the top, as the palmetto matures.

For landscapers and others who seem obsessed with the growth and color anomalies of species in the commercial trade, Miller points out that because of their ability to produce numerous anomalies and widely ranging ambiguous characteristics, the cabbage palm should be one of the most attractive and most expensive plants available. That its characteristic variations practically beg for comparison to other species challenges the mind of the reader to eventually explore more subjects.

To aid the non-botanist, he carefully explains scientific nomenclature, many useful botanical terms, and tools like keys, including their shortcomings and how they are used. Before describing the disease effects of fungi, bacteria, and viruses on the palmetto, he describes these organisms, their life histories, and how to treat them.

Is it invasive or native? Is it a tree or a grass? Are the trunks wood or not? There are so many contradictory prejudices that humans have for the palmetto, and Miller uses them to make story-lessons: Do they grow best in shade or sun? Are they slow growing or fast growing? Are they commonplace or extraordinarily unique? They're flammable, yet fire survivors? Why are some temperature-tolerant and some temperature-intolerant? If they've been starvation food, how come they are also considered gourmet cuisine? Why are they worthless to some who can't get rid of them fast enough and commercially valuable for others to make paper, pots, baskets, thatch, homes and photographic, artistic, or (Elvis) movie subjects?

Miller often takes side-tracks to related environmental issues and memories of his own experiences. He sometimes proposes and sometimes debunks theories regarding how characteristics occurred or evolved, but he always brings the issues back to their relevance to the palmetto. Along the way, Miller proposes hypotheses regarding whether environmental, genetic, or one-time events are responsible for its diversity of characteristics. This allows him to use the cabbage palm to discuss the effects of each of those three vectors on species' ranges, diseases, and competition. Other environmental issues he addresses via the cabbage palm are fire effects and the effects of transplantation and pruning on growth patterns. Species interactions and the disturbance of such interactions are also topics addressed within his stories of research, human culture, and experiences.

For the history buffs, in addition to many John Muir quotes throughout the book, there are descriptions of the many historical roles of the palm. Miller describes its use during the revolutionary and civil wars, encounters with Spanish explorers, use by Native Americans and U.S. surveyors, and its inclusions on the flags of South Carolina and Florida.

—Sheila Strawn, *Author of Lichen Study Guide for Oklahoma and Surrounding States and Lichen Field Guide for Oklahoma and Surrounding States, Midwest City, Oklahoma, U.S.A.*