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Engineer rooting for survival of palm tree growing in Arlington construction zone

12:00 AM CDT on Friday, October 16, 2009

This is an improbable love story about an unlikely pair, a buttoned-down engineer from Carrollton and an exotic outsider living in a bleak Arlington construction zone. It's about the tensile grace of perseverance.

Richard McMullen first spotted what he has come to call the Division Street Palm more than three years ago, when he was on his way to visit an academic colleague at the [University of Texas](#) at Arlington.

The tree, a picture-perfect specimen of *Sabal texana*, the South Texas palm, typically grows in the lush, fertile lowlands of the Rio Grande Valley.

This one was growing – flourishing, incredibly – hard up against the Division Street bridge on a garbage-strewn embankment overlooking State Highway 360.

It was a particularly unlovely stretch of industrial landscape then, and it's even more so today – a noisy, heavily trafficked site rumbling with the racket of highway construction, speeding traffic and freight trains on the nearby railroad tracks.

It looks like a pretty hopeless spot to grow a patch of pokeweed, much less a semitropical palm. Yet there it was, undulating lazily in the breeze.

McMullen was captivated. He still is.

"Look at it!" he enthused when we went to look at it this week. He had to shout over the throaty growl of bulldozers gouging a site for a new overpass just a few feet away. "It's a gem, in the middle of all this dirt, this industrial development. It's thriving!"

McMullen, a 58-year-old researcher with a doctorate in mechanical engineering, is a precise and analytical man, not usually given to extravagant emotion or sweeping sentiment. Yet the lone palm, incongruously rooted in gummy, debris-littered clay among slabs of discarded concrete, became an obsession.

"It's just incredible that it could grow to this size in a place like this," he said. "It must have super genes."

McMullen took photos of the palm and sent them out as greeting cards to friends and family. He drove acquaintances out to admire it. During the worst of the summer heat, he filled a half-dozen hardware-store barrels with water and drove to Arlington in the predawn darkness to irrigate its roots.

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He slipped into the familiar habit of calling the tree an "old friend."

He contacted arborists to talk about the palm, to discuss its odds for survival. One of them was Steve Houser, who chairs the Dallas Urban Forest Advisory Committee.

"To have an affection for something that's a natural asset – that should be more common," Houser said. "That tree is showing us that it's able to endure a lot. Maybe people look at it and think, 'This is indicative of my life, trying to survive in this city.' I've got to respect that."

As hardy as it is, though, the palm tree cannot withstand the evolution of progress indefinitely. The Texas Department of Transportation, which is rebuilding the frenetic Highway 360-Division Street interchange, plans to tear it out when the old bridge is demolished to make way for a new structure, scheduled for completion by late 2011.

In an e-mail from project engineers forwarded to McMullen after he contacted TxDOT about the tree, he was told its preservation is "not a major concern" because "it is non-native to this area and not the kind of tree we usually plant in our ROW [right-of-way]."

He's not sure where to turn next, he said. "I'll take any ideas I can get." What he really wants is to see the tree relocated to a more hospitable location, someplace it at least has a shot at survival.

Which is not impossible, Houser said. *Sabal texana* has a compact root system and is easily transplanted.

What could drive the cost of relocation into the thousands, he said, would be closing the bridge and clearing the debris around the palm's base.

McMullen would like to see the tree transplanted elsewhere in Arlington but would gladly have it at his suburban Carrollton home, as well. He just wants it to live.

"It's a beauty, isn't it?" he said, as contented as if we had been strolling in a verdant valley, rich with the scent of tropical flowers, instead of lingering unnervingly close to a roaring stream of traffic that belched diesel fumes in the chilly, gray air.

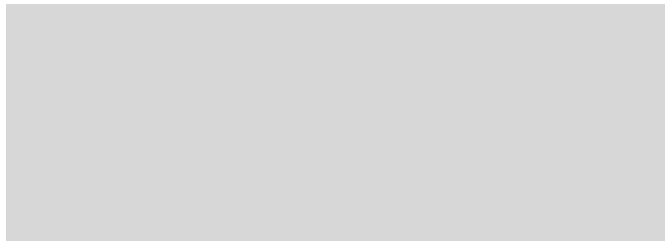
"It's an old friend to me," he said. "It's a marvel."

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Posted by **kt2le** | 5 days ago



I know the tree and pass it almost every day. It's truly something unique and I've always been amazed at how it thrives in such a harsh environment. With all the new construction, I was wondering what would happen to it.

3 | 0

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Posted by **opossum** | 6 days ago



not a fund for jf, but a fund for the tree...come to think of it, i'll contribute to a "save jf" fund, too...if she's ever in danger...or endangered...

3 | 0

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Posted by **opossum** | 6 days ago



i love jf...i'll contribute if there's a fund...

2 | 0

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Posted by **Lisame** | 6 days ago



I would love to see a picture of this!

4 | 0

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Posted by **Ralphieboy** | 1 week ago



Anybody remember the Witness Oak?

3 | 0

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Posted by **maggie25** | 1 week ago



I second DFWpalms message. This isn't a Sabal Mexicana but a Washingtonia Filifera. This will have implications for transplanting.

The comment:

"It must have super genes."

is based on it being a different kind of tree. While it is a good specimen, this tree grows to these proportions all over the Dallas area.



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Posted by **DFWpalms** | 1 week ago



The palm is *Washingtonia filifera* native to Southern California. This isn't a native Texas palm but is an excellent choice of a cold hardy palm for North Texas.

Sabal texana is a local name for *Sabal mexicana*'s northern most population located in South Texas. :)

Being native to a true desert area, *Washingtonia filifera* thrives in Dallas abundant heat and comparative rainfall. It is also very fast growing putting on about 2 feet of very thick trunk a year in irrigated conditions. It produces hundreds of thousands of very easily germinated seeds/year and the seedling pop up everywhere in Central city Dallas where they have become established. The old *Washingtonias* at Fair park used to line the tall buildings since the 1930s and live about 50 years till we had 12 days below freezing in 1983.

Washingtonia filifera should be planted in the appropriate places throughout the metroplex but be careful to avoid the less cold hardy cousing *Washingtonia robusta* which defoliates each year.

Check out some spectacular specimens of both species at the silver city strip club on 35E near mockingbird lane in Dallas. The *filiferas* are in the background with very thick trunks and the *robustas* are tall and thinner in the front, closer to the highway.

Now do like lady bird Johnson and beautify, beautify by planting the appropriate cold hardy palms. Did you know one species *Sabal minor* is native to Dallas county?

:)



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Posted by **Cosmos Woodshop** | 1 week ago



I love this tree, I always point it out to visitors to Arlington. I hope it can be saved!



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Posted by **thewoo** | 1 week ago



I'll throw in a couple of bucks.



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