

Q&A 7-21-12

Q: I heard that a rare palm had flowered at the Ruth Bancroft Garden. Can you tell me what it was?

A: The palm which flowered is *Jubaea chilensis*, also known as the Chilean Wine Palm. This slow-growing species has a massive trunk, probably the fattest of all the palms. Its native home in central Chile has a climate very similar to California's, so these trees do very well here. Our palm at the Ruth Bancroft Garden flowered for the first time last year, but the flowers were hidden within the crown of leaves atop the tree, so we were unaware of the flowering until nuts began to fall in autumn. This year, we were keeping an eye out for it and were delighted when the flowers emerged in late June. Though this is not easy to see from below, the tiny flowers are actually an attractive reddish-purple on the outside and yellowish-white within.

Q: Many years ago, when I lived in southern California, I had a neighbor whose collection of succulents included one called *Cotyledon wallichii*. It had a bumpy stem and cylindrical leaves, much like the plant mentioned in the July 7 column under the name *Tylecodon wallichii*. Assuming this is the same plant, why was his called *Cotyledon* and yours called *Tylecodon*?

A: *Tylecodon* and *Cotyledon* are close relatives in the family *Crassulaceae* (the Stonecrop Family). Originally, all of them were included in the genus *Cotyledon*, but in 1978 the summer-dormant ones were split off into a newly-created genus named *Tylecodon* (an anagram of *Cotyledon*). The reasoning behind this move was sound, since there are several significant differences between the two groups. First, the plants remaining in *Cotyledon* keep their leaves all year long without going dormant in summer. Second, in *Cotyledons* the leaves emerge in pairs, with one on either side of the stem (in botany, this is referred to as "opposite leaves"), while in *Tylecodons* the leaves emerge one-by-one in a spiral arrangement. Third, the lower stems of *Tylecodons* are swollen (such plants are known as "pachycauls"), while *Cotyledons* lack this trait. Both groups have bell-like flowers with curled-back petal tips, but these are more often large and showy in *Cotyledon* than in *Tylecodon*.

Both *Tylecodon wallichii* and *Tylecodon paniculatus* (and the hybrid between them, *T. x dinteri*) are winter growers which go dormant in summer, and thus were put in *Tylecodon* when the genus was created in 1978. However, growers were slow to adopt the new name, and plants are still sometimes seen labeled with the old names.

