

Mauritiella armata, slender and thorny.

By Reinoud Norde and Feddo Oldenburger.

During a leisurely walk along the edge of a white sand savanna South of the Sipaliwini Airstrip, a small band of botanical explorers came across a cluster of somewhat unfamiliar looking Maurisie palms.



Photo's Joop Schulz

On closer inspection they soon realised that the palms they were looking at, did not belong to the common species *Mauritia flexuosa* they knew so well.

Joop Schulz, Feddo Oldenburger and John Tawjoeram had been busy for weeks studying the vegetation of the Great Sipaliwini Savanna where *Mauritia flexuosa* is abundant in depressions and along watercourses. The trees in front of them however were different, distinguished by slender whitish trunks covered in 3 cm long, lignose root-thorns.

They realised this was a special find that needed thorough documentation

Measurements and photo's were taken, notes on the surrounding vegetation were made and a seedling was collected.

This all happened on the 13th of February 1970. The next day they returned to Paramaribo after a month of research in the wild, open savanna near the Brazilian border, mapping the various vegetation units and making plant collections.



Joop Schulz taking in situ photo's of Mauritiella armata seedlings.

After having returned to the capital they were able to confirm their tentative identification of this thorny palm as *Mauritia martiana* Spruce, a synonym for the now generally accepted name *Mauritiella armata* (Mart.) Burret.

From that same white sand savanna one incomplete collection of what seemed to be the same palm species was made seven years earlier by a local assistant of dr. J.G. Wessels Boer. In his dissertation 'The Indigenous Palms of Suriname (1965) he writes on the subject: *The single gathering from Suriname, only incompletely collected by a native collector (Blanca) in the author's absence, is thought to belong to Mauritia martiana.... The Suriname collection matches perfectly Jenman 904 from the Kaieteur Savanna, British Guiana(K); according to the label the species is common on the Potaro R. above and below the Kaieteur.* At the time (1963) Wessels Boer was staying at the Sipaliwini Airstrip, immobilized by a severe foot infection. According to a recent (2012) letter these were *weeks of frustration, filled with a lot of grumbling and complaining, the only consolation being the unexpected present of some collected parts of a thorny Maurisie palm.*

He reckons Mauritiella armata is exceptional in the sense that the species is not found in the coastal regions of Suriname. Does the Sipaliwini location show a variable and rejuvenating population as an integrated part of the natural vegetation.

Our answer to this is positive.

Or could it perhaps be introduced by roving indians? Possibly, no strong indications.

Wessels Boer concludes his letter by suggesting that *There is still a good deal of work to do on the taxonomy of the Mauritiella palms. I wonder who will take this up.*

As far as we know *Mauritiella armata* has -up to now- not been found anywhere else in Surinam. So the white sand savannas South of the Sipaliwini could be the Northern tip of the widespread distribution area, all through Amazonia. Locally the leaves are used in roof constructions and the fruit is eaten.

A leisurely walk along the edge of a white sand savanna, that is all it takes to find a slender and thorny palm: *Mauritiella armata*.



Feddo Oldenburger collecting Mauritiella seedling

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Joop Schulz on the Sipaliwini riverbank (1970)