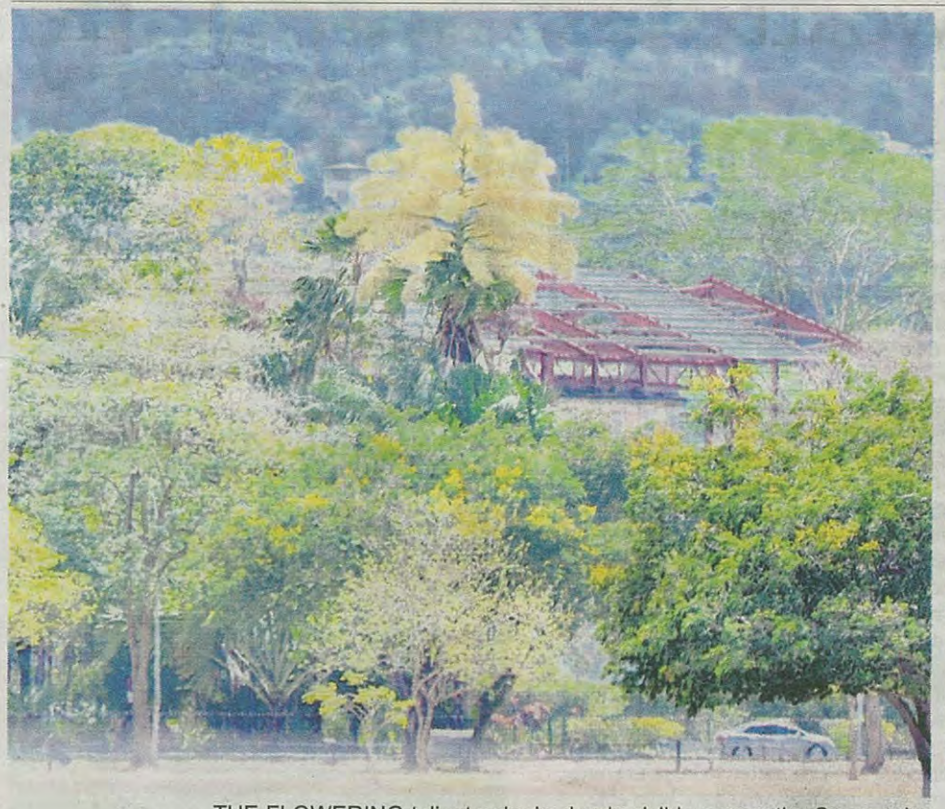


THE FLOWERING talipot palm is clearly visible across the Savannah.

NOT TO BE outdone, the native palmiste (Roystonia oleracea) is also an impressive palm.

The death of a giant

Hurry. A giant is dying. For over fifty years it has stood silently as the citizens of our country scurried about at its feet unaware.

It probably observed our independence in 1962 and saw the smoke rising in Port-of-Spain in 1990. This giant has lived its entire life for one moment and that moment is now.

Sounds like the stuff of movies, right? Well actually the giant is at the Queen's Park Savannah right now, in the garden of the President's House to be exact. This giant is a talipot palm, Corypha umbraculifera, one of the largest palms in the world.

The flowering of a talipot palm is a rarely seen event and, for many of us, it will be a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence.

Imagine a tree, towering 25 metres high, that has lived quietly for at least 50 years, but never flowered. One day, in response to some mysterious signal, it begins to raise a vast stalk of flowers above it, reaching for the sky – the largest inflorescence in the plant kingdom at some six to eight metres in length.

THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

If you have driven around the Queen's Park Savannah recently you might have noticed its spectacular fountain of yellow-brown flowers. What you see is not a single flower but rather several millions of individual flowers clustered together. By the looks of it, the flower cluster in this specimen is at least five metres across. In fact, it is so large that it is easily visible from the other side of the savannah.

This palm is a native of southern India and Sri Lanka (where it happens to be the national tree). Because of its utility it has been widely planted and cultivated in other regions of the world. Talipot palms are graceful, beautiful and imposing structures which have been planted in botanical gardens across the tropics, following the footstep of colonial rule.

They may reach 30 metres high, and each massive fan shaped leaf may measure up to 6.5 metres across.

In Asia the leaves were used for thatching roofs. One leaf could probably shelter ten men from the rain in the forest (sorry carat).

But almost all parts of the plant are useful. The timber can be used for construction, and buttons made from parts of the seeds. The heart of the palm can be eaten, and a starchy extract from the trunk is edible also. There is even a wine than can be made from the emerging flower stalk.

There are few specimens of talipot palm in Trinidad and Tobago, most are either in or associated with the Botanic Gardens, and on the grounds of the University of West Indies, St Augustine.

● DEATH *continues on Page 6B*

ENVIRONMENT

Once in a lifetime bloom

●DEATH *from Page 4B*

These trees are likely to be descendants of original trees brought in by the English colonial effort. It is possible that bats have spread some seeds, as occasionally talipots turn up elsewhere.

Although the talipot is one of the world's largest palms, we should not forget our native palm species. In fact the specimen at the Presidents House is towered over by one of our own. This is the massive and regal Roystonia oleracea, better known as the palmiste, which is native to both our islands. The palmiste is a prominent and important feature of some of our coastal and wetland ecosystems, such as the Nariva swamp.

Botanists Paul Comeau, Yasmin Baksh-Comeau, and Winston Johnson have documented and described our array of local palms in the beautiful book *The Palm Book of Trinidad and Tobago*. Palm lovers should also share a moment of silent gratitude to the botanists who created and developed the Botanical Gardens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Beginning in 1816, their work in the collection of about seven hundred trees from all over the tropics now allows us to appreciate the spectacular talipot palm.

But what makes the talipot so special is not simply its beauty, utility and history. Neither is it the sheer scale of the flowering event. Rather, it is the manner in which it flowers.

Throughout its lifespan of 30 to 80 years, the palm saves and stores its energy to produce these flowers – an entire life for one flowering. It will bloom at no other time in its life.

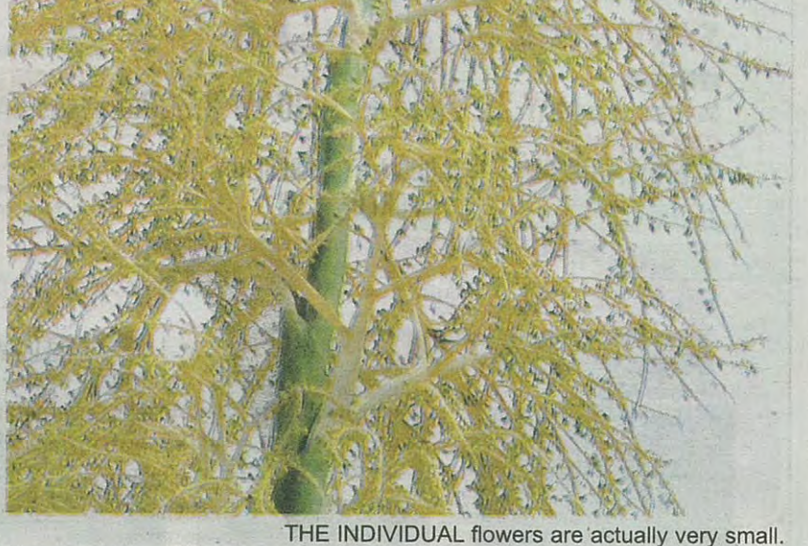
After flowering, the fruits develop in their millions, taking up to a year to develop. Plants which exhibit this mode of flowering and reproduction are referred to as monocarpic plants (meaning once in a lifetime) and is a method also employed by some of our agaves, bromeliads and bamboos.

What this means, of course, is that the blooming specimen at President's House will soon be dead. So you need to hurry as this may be the only time in your life you may see this tree bloom.

Perhaps even in its death can we gain something from the talipot. That providing for the next generation entails a great deal of sacrifice and work. The environment is our legacy for our children. Let us try to preserve and foster that legacy, protect our flora and fauna and plant some more amazing trees for future generations to see.

Today's feature was written by Feroze Omardeen. For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit our website at www.ttfnc.org. The Club's next monthly meeting will be held on June 12 at St Mary's College, PoS.

The massive flower cluster of the talipot palm (Corypha umbraculifera).



THE INDIVIDUAL flowers are actually very small.