

BOTANICAL INFORMATION.

Note on PIASSABA.

To the Editor of the Kew Garden Miscellany.

Dear Sir,—You must well remember the surprise which was caused among botanists by the very confident manner in which Mr. A. R. Wallace announced, in his little work on the ‘Palm Trees of the Amazon,’ that the plant producing the Piassaba of commerce is not the *Attalea funifera* of Martius, but a *new species* of *Leopoldinia*, which he called *L. Piassaba*.* Mr. Wallace honestly confessed himself but slightly acquainted with the science of botany, which excited still more surprise that he should, in his first essay, ‘unhesitatingly’ offer an opinion in opposition to the immortal Martius, whose work he has so largely used in his ‘Palm Trees of the Amazon;’ while many attributed it rather to his want of a fuller knowledge of the subject.

In your review of his book you took a wiser view of the case: acknowledging your respect for the opinion of the great German botanist, you nevertheless thought it advisable to inquire more fully into the subject.

* In justice however to Mr. Wallace, and in justice to the author of the critique in our ‘Journal of Botany,’ we insert the following extract of a letter just received from Mr. Spruce:—“When Mr. Wallace came down the Rio Negro, in September, 1851, he showed me a few figures of Palms. I pointed out to him which seemed to be new, and encouraged him to go on. I also proposed that we should work them up together, I taking the literary part and he the pictorial, which he declined. As I had also met with some of his Palms, and had my names for them, this caused me to relax in my study of the tribe, seeing myself likely to be forestalled in the results of my labours. He has sent me a copy; the figures are very pretty, and with some of them he has been very successful: I may instance the figures of *Raphia tedigera*, and *Acrocomia sclerocarpa*. The worst figure in the book is that of *Iriartea ventricosa*. The most striking fault of nearly all the figures of the larger species is that the stem is much too thick compared with the length of the fronds, and that the latter bear only half as many pinnæ as they ought to have. The descriptions are worse than nothing,—in many cases not a single circumstance that a botanist would care to know; but the accounts of the uses are good. His *Leopoldinia Piassaba* and *Mauritia Carana* are two magnificent new Palms, both correctly referred to their genus, but the former has been figured from a stunted specimen. I have got a series of specimens for your Museum, showing the way in which the *Piassaba* grows on the tree.”—It is thus clear that there are two Palms affording the Piassaba of commerce, of which the one we have as good reason to believe to be the *Attalea funifera* of Martius, as we know the other to be the *Leopoldinia Piassaba* of Mr. Wallace; and our friend Mr. Archer, in his present letter, thanks to the commercial importance of his place of residence, confirms the fact by the statement of a difference in the fibres of the two.—ED.

I am strongly inclined to think that the result will prove you right ; for I believe it will be found that the production of this curious and now very useful vegetable fibre is not confined to one plant, but is certainly yielded by two Palms at least. At all events I am prepared to prove that there are two distinct kinds of Piassaba known in commerce, differing so widely in quality that one now sells for £20 to £30 per ton, whilst the other realizes not less than £45. I hope soon to send specimens of both to the Museum of Economic Botany.

It is still stronger evidence in favour of my opinion, that these two qualities do not come from one locality, but the very fine kind comes from (the Rio Negro by way of) Pará, and the inferior one from Ceará. There is too little difference in these two places to warrant the supposition that a mere change of habitat can be the cause ; and as the trees are not *cultivated* in either district, it cannot result from culture ; the cause therefore will in all probability be as I have suggested.

At present the consumption of Piassaba is very considerable. I cannot exactly ascertain the quantity imported, but it is certainly over 2000 tons ; the coarser kind (Ceará) is used for street brooms and similar rough cleaning implements, but the fine kind (Pará) is extensively employed in the formation of brushes used in the cloth factories, and when dyed black is largely mixed with bristles and used in the manufacture of cheap clothes-brushes, and even hair-brushes, etc.

Whether Mr. Wallace has truly described the Palm from which he saw the Piassaba taken, is another question, and can only be decided by a competent botanical authority, after an examination of the plant ; but his powers of observation are considerable, and have been well trained, and his opinion is entitled to that respect which you so gracefully accorded. Yours truly,

T. C. ARCHER.

June 11, 1855.
