

Exploring the Miramundo Cloud Forest in Guatemala

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Since 1971, we have explored one of the two existing cloud forests of importance in eastern Guatemala (2). The cloud forest of Miramundo is located in the eastern province of Jalapa and reaches an altitude of 2,950 meters above sea level. The word "Miramundo" means "Outlook to the World", and in this case, one can see part of Honduras and neighboring El Salvador from the top of the unique montane cloud forest. At sunrise, there is a magnificent view toward the east over sections of Honduras and El Salvador. To the west, several Guatemalan volcanoes (of the 32 that we have) are visible. The second of the two cloud forests in western Guatemala is on the slopes of the volcano Quetzaltepeque.

The mountain Miramundo is in a mountain range that is an appendage of the famous Sierra Madre, and is one of four major mountains; the other three are Soledad Grande, Cerro Santiago, and Soledad. Two hamlets are found in this mountain range: Miramundo and Soledad.

The best way to reach the Miramundo cloud forest is to drive a truck or a jeep first to Jalapa, the principal city of the province of Jalapa. Then climbing from the east, one drives westward to reach the cloud forest by way of a rough road that after several hours takes you to Mataquesquintla. Driving through pine and oak forests, where the Quetzalillo exists (*Trogon mexicanus*), you reach the hamlet of Miramundo.

Since 1971 when the first author began collaborating with the second author, I made a friend, don Neco (Fig. 1), who allowed me to camp in front of his little store where he sold mainly candles, as there is no electricity there. By candlelight, Martin Grande, Martincito, and I cooked our dinner with the north wind blowing hard against his little house and our truck outside. Don Neco told us stories in the cold weather that felt like Alaska! Many years later, with Daniel Lopez my Mayan guide, we camped there again and saw don Neco for the last time; he died shortly after that trip, in 1988.

In a recent exploration trip, don Neco's son Jorge kindly allowed us to use his candle light, drinking water, and wood fire. In the morning, the little hamlet of Miramundo had a blanket of clouds. When the clouds disappeared with sunrise at seven o'clock in the morning, the view toward Honduras and El Salvador was magnificent.

Then the exploration began and we encountered dozens of very old as well as young trees of the primitive ancestors of the avocado, *Persea nubigena* and *P. steyermarkii* (1, 2). Don Neco showed us the first trees in 1971 and 1973. On one of those early trips, as we hiked down a canyon and up the other side, we saw more trees; and don Neco very

proudly showed us the fruit of *P. steyermarkii* as seen in the photo with his son Francisco (Fig. 1).

In these mountains we found "variants" of both species (*P. nubigena* and *P. steyermarkii*). These "variants" differ primarily in the shape and color of the fruit; the leaves of trees in the Miramundo area are similar to trees of these species studied in other areas (Fig. 2).

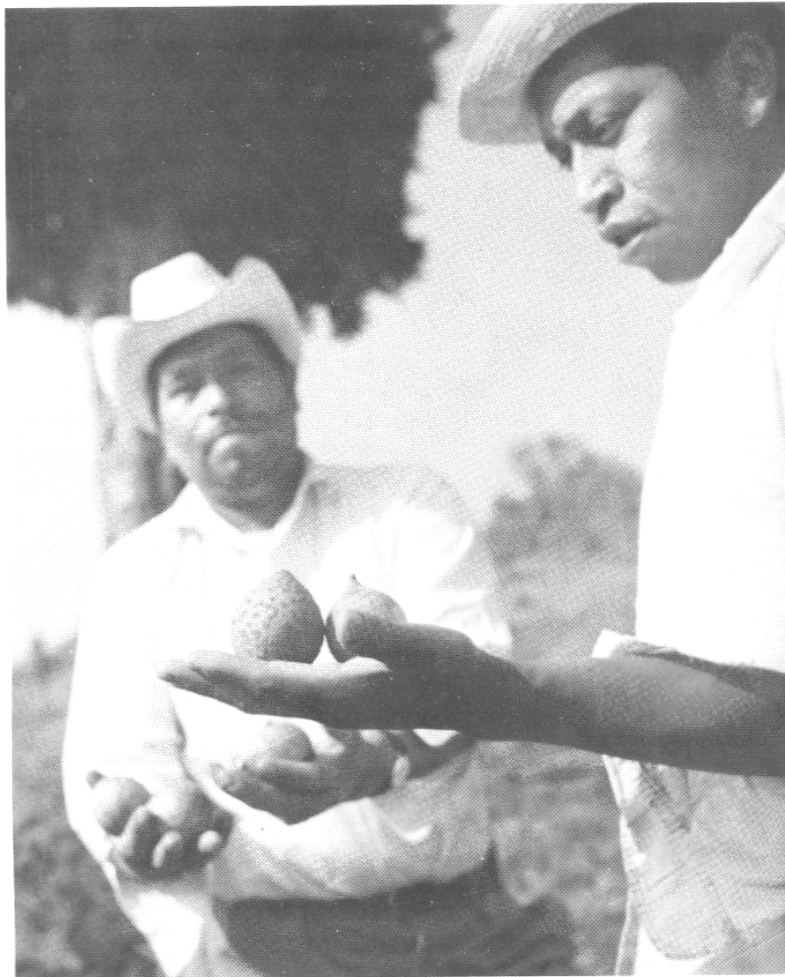


Fig. 1. Don Neco (left) and his son Francisco, showing fruit of Persea steyermarkii. The tree in the background is of the same species.



Fig. 2. Daniel Lopez holding branch of *P. steyermarkii* at Miramundo.

In the opinion of the senior author, the heaviest stands of *P. nubigena* and *P. steyermarkii* seen in his explorations of Middle America including southern Mexico, occur in this region of Miramundo in Guatemala. One of the reasons is that civilization has really not come yet to this part of Guatemala as easily or rapidly as to other areas. There is no electricity and the rough road is a deterrent—so, there are no tourists!

Literature Cited

1. Schieber, E., and G. A. Zentmyer. 1978. Hunting for *Persea steyermarkii* in the mountains of Guatemala. *California Avocado Society Yearbook* 62: 67-71.
2. Schieber, E., and G. A. Zentmyer. 1981. Exploring for *Persea* on volcano Quetzaltepeque, Guatemala. *California Avocado Society Yearbook* 65: 57-63.

Notes

The details about don Neco and his son Jorge are a tribute to this family that has helped so much in our explorations in the Miramundo cloud forest. Photos by E. Schieber