Notes on Economic Plants

***Pouteria ucuqui* (Sapotaceae), a Little-known Amazonian Fruit Tree Worthy of Domestication.**—The genus *Pouteria* (Sapotaceae) comprises some 50 species of tropical American trees. Only four or five yield edible fruits. One of the least known species is *Pouteria ucuqui* Murça Pires et Schultes (*1*), a wild, 90–100 ft tree, never cultivated, of the forests of the northwest Amazon of Brazil, Colombia, and probably Venezuela (Fig. 1.).

The ripe fruits fall in great profusion and are gathered by natives, who eat the sweet, orange-yellow mesocarp directly or prepare a *mingão* or porridge with *farinha,* the meal of *Manihot esculenta* Crantz. Many piles of seeds and husks around Indian houses attest to the great value of this fruit as a food during the fruiting season.

The genus and species of *ucuquí* was not known until 1950, when flowering material, collected in 1948, was available. The tree rains a profusion of aromatic-pungent yellow flowers (Fig. 2); they fall from the tree the same day that they open. Bees and other insects are found in great abundance in the crown of the tree on the day of flowering.

The Brazilian term *ucuquí,* of Nheengatú origin, refers exclusively to this tree and should not be confused with *ucuquirana,* the name of a sapindaceous source of balata, *Ecclinusa sanguinolenta* Pierre. In Colombia, the Tukano Indians know the tree as *puch-pee-á,* the Kuripakos as *oó-le-da* and *heé-ne-ree,* the Kubeos as *pá-ko-ra,* the Puinave as *bee,* the Makú of the Río Piraparaná as *foó-hee-ya,* and the Mirañas as *ká-he-pa.* The Spanish-speaking population of the Columbian and Venezuelan Amazonian region call it *yucú.*

Pouteria ucuqui should be considered as a candidate for domestication and selection for more rapid growth and early fruiting; according to field information, this slow-growing tree does not set fruit for 25 yr.

We have the British explorer-naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace to thank for an early account of *ucuquí* (*2*). Some 140 years ago, during his stay in the upper Rio Negro and Uaupés of Brazil, he wrote: "Of a passing Indian . . . I bought a basket of Ocokí and some fish. The Ocokí is a large pear-shaped fruit, with a hard thick outer skin of almost woody texture, then a small quantity of very sweet pulpy matter, and within a large black oval stone. The pulp is very luscious, but is so acrid as to make the mouth and throat sore if more than two or three are eaten. When, however, the juice is boiled it loses this property; and when made into mingau with tapioca, is exceedingly palatable and very highly esteemed in the upper Rio Negro, where it is abundant. It takes at least a peck of fruit to give one small panella [basket] of mingau.

"On the next day . . . the Indians all suddenly sprang like otters into the water, swam to the shore, and disappeared in the forest. 'Ocokí' was the answer to my inquiries as to the cause of their sudden disappearance; and I soon found they had discovered an ocokí-tree, and were loading themselves with the fruit to satisfy the cravings of hunger, for the Indian's throat and mouth seem invulnerable to all those scarifying substances which act upon civilised man. The tree is one of the loftiest in the forest, but the fruit falls as soon as ripe, and its hard woody coating preserves it from injury. Baskets, shirts, trousers, etc., were soon filled with

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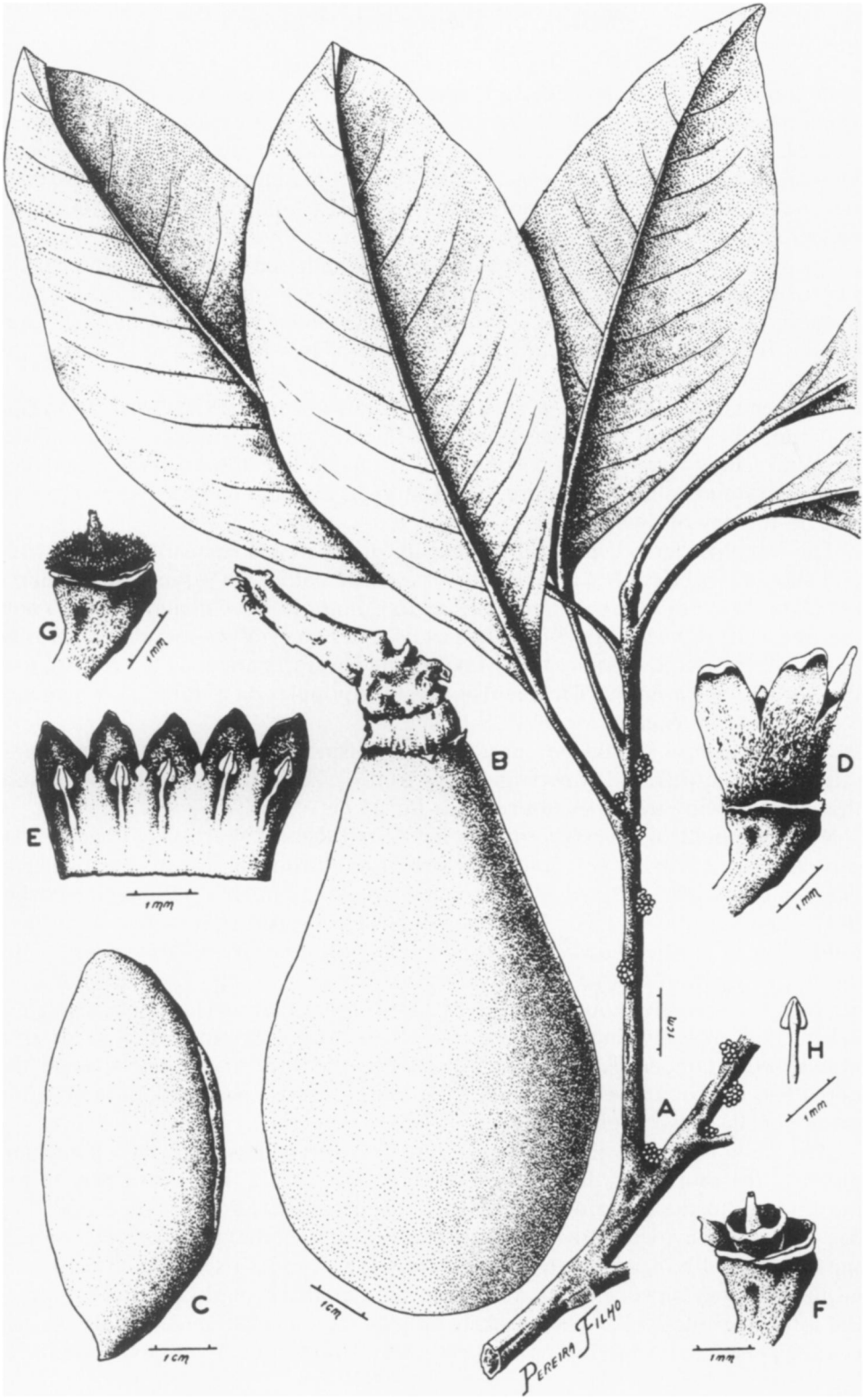
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PEREIRA FILHO

Fig. 2. *Pouteria ucuqui.* Flowers of the type specimen, ×10. (Photograph by Richard E. Schultes.)

the fruit and emptied into the canoe; and I made each of the Indians bring a small basketful for me; so that we had 'mingau de ocokí' for three succeeding mornings."

Recently, this species-concept has been accorded generic status (a *nomen nudum*), but there seems to be no definitive character on which to base such a major category.

Literature Cited. (*1*) Murça Pires, J., and R. E. Schultes. 1950. The identity of ucuquí. Bot. Mus. Leafl. 14:87–96. Pls. xx–xxiii; (*2*) Wallace, A. R. 1908. Notes of a botanist on the Amazon & Andes . . . during the years 1849–1864. London.

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Fig. 1. *Pouteria ucuqui.* A. Flowering branch; B. Fruit; C. Seed; D. Flower; E. Interior of corolla; F. Dissection of flower, showing disc around ovary; G. Dissection of flower, showing pilosity around ovary; H. Anther. Lines equal 1 cm (A, B, C) or 1 mm (D, E, F, G, H).