For Immediate Release

Contact: Connie George | Director of Marketing and Communications
412/638-6008 | cgeorge@phipps.conservatory.org

"Miracle Fruit for Women" Harvested at Alarming Rate

Phipps Conservatory supports research fellow's efforts to find more sustainable harvesting method

Pittsburgh, Pa. — Known by some as the "miracle fruit for women," the aguaje fruit is not one commonly found in American grocery stores. It grows on palm trees in the swamps of the Amazon Basin, and is a common meal for tapirs, primates, toucans, fish and humans in the region. The palm trees play an important role in their ecosystem, providing both homes and food for many species. However, the trees' structural and nutritional role in Amazonian forests is not the reason why the trees are being cut down at an alarming rate.

Consuming the aguaje fruit yields surprising results. This fruit contains substantial amounts of phyto-hormones, which mimic female hormones in the body. Eating aguaje can help ease the symptoms of menopause and increase a woman's buttock, breast and thigh size. In some cultures, all of these attributes are admirable. Aguaje is highly nutritious, containing seven to 12 times more beta carotene than carrots, oil that can be used to treat skin damage and fatty acids that keep skin firm.

Coveted for these attributes, aguaje is vital to the Peruvian economy and an important part of its culture. Selling aguaje makes up approximately 5 – 15% of the total household income for families in the region. However, farmers often cut down the palm trees in order to harvest the fruit. One city alone, Iquitos, cuts down about 1,000 palm trees per month. The number of palm trees is beginning to dwindle and the ecosystem is feeling the effects of losing these trees.

Chelsie Romulo, a doctoral candidate in the Environmental Science and Policy Department at George Mason University, and a Botany in Action Fellow at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens, is studying the economy and ecology of this tree and hopes to provide methods to better manage and conserve the species. "In order to make that happen, there will need to be a very significant outreach strategy," she says. She will present her research to Phipps visitors this Friday, Sept. 23 from 5 to 7 p.m.

Chelsie's experience in the Botany in Action Fellowship program at Phipps Conservatory is improving the way that she communicates her research and findings to the public and to key influencers. The Fellowship supports emerging plant-focused scientists through research grants and science communication training.

"The BIA program has provided very important support for my dissertation, both monetarily and also through their outreach," Chelsie says. Since starting the program three years ago, she has developed a research blog and become more confident in presenting and communicating her work.

One way that the Botany in Action program encourages fellows to improve their communication skills is through poster sessions. One such presentation will occur on Fri., Sept. 23, where Chelsie, along with five other BIA Fellows, will present her latest findings. "Not only does the BIA fellowship support us

through research funds, but the science engagement week provides us with resources and lessons for outreach that we don't normally get in our curriculum, plus the hands-on experience of actually doing outreach!" she says. "It is a critical component of the Fellowship."

To learn more about Chelsie and the Phipps' Botany in Action program, visit **phipps.conservatory.org**.

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About Phipps: Founded in 1893, Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in Pittsburgh, Pa. is a green leader among public gardens with a mission to inspire and educate all with the beauty and importance of plants; to advance sustainability and promote human and environmental well-being through action and research; and to celebrate its historic glasshouse. Learn more: phipps.conservatory.org.

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