

SFA

Seeds for Africa

Travelers Palm

It originates from Madagascar which is reflected in its botanical name, *Ravenala madagascariensis*. It is a member of the Strelitziaceae family, and therefore closely related to the Bird of Paradise.

The flowers, which can be as much as two feet in diameter, resemble those of the white Bird of Paradise (*Strelitzia nicolai*), but they are green. The inflorescences will mature over the course of a growing season, shed their many small white-brown blooms, and then dry up. A fresh green flower stalk is VERY heavy with the water it contains, whereas the bloomed out flower is light, although full of yellow seedpods, which will burst open to reveal the absolutely striking lapis-lazuli blue seeds inside.

A mature tree blooms continuously in tropical zones. In its native land Madagascar the Ruffed Lemur is the plant's pollinator. In our area the birds do this honour, and I often see swarms of bees in the tree as well.

Germination of the seeds requires warmth and moisture, not surprising for a tree at home in the tropics, but it is not difficult and the plants can be grown as indoor specimens until they become too big.

It is recommended to soak the seeds overnight prior to planting, and to remove the blue seed-coat. It appreciates a fairly rich soil and abundant water, although it is quite drought-tolerant once established.

Starting from the ground up as a young plant, the tree will not have a trunk at all; this is formed later when the leaves mature and die off. When left to grow undisturbed it will make suckers rapidly which eventually results in a huge mass of trunks.

In cultivation, it is more desirable to allow just one or two of the trunks to grow since this best displays the striking fan-like arrangement of its leaves which

gives the tree its alternate name. These leaves reach approximately 12 to 15 feet long and a fully grown tree is truly majestic.

The only drawback to its height is the fact that since it grows in tropical zones (reported to be 9a through 11, although the cooler zone is a definite stretch) the tree is often subject to heavy windstorms which will shred the leaves, giving it a somewhat messy look.

It is of course possible to grow the tree from the suckers from a mature tree; however, I have found that separating the pups is a huge undertaking and only rarely successful. The key is to get a pup that is big enough that it will survive being separated from the mother tree with a sufficient number of roots to allow it to grow independently.

There are a few tales attached to this tree: one is that the foliage will automatically orient itself in a west-east direction. I can tell you from experience that this is not the case. In Barbados there is a myth that claims that if a person stands directly in front of a traveller's palm and makes a wish, it will come true. Clearly this is only true in Barbados since it hasn't worked in Southwest Florida!

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