

GROWING *Saribus rotundifolius* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Saribus rotundifolius was first described and named *Corypha rotundifolia* in 1786. Since that time it was renamed many times. Throughout the years the genus was changed from *Corypha* to *Licuala*, *Livistona*, *Chamaerops*, back to *Livistona* (five different species), and then in 2011 was renamed *Saribus rotundifolius* which is its current classification.

The genus *Saribus* was resurrected to include 8 former *Livistona* species and *Pritchardiopsis jeanneneyi*. The reclassification was based on molecular and morphological data such as differences in inflorescences, epidermis cells and fibers. What amazes me the most is that *Saribus* is more closely related to *Pholidocarpus*, *Licuala* and *Johannesteijsmannia* than to the remaining species of *Livistona*.

Saribus rotundifolius is considered a variable species with a wide distribution throughout Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Its conservation status is "least concern." It is found at elevations of 0-1,000 feet. Native habitat straddles the equator ranging from 18°N to 10°S. Annual rainfall can be as high as 160 inches. That's 2-1/2 times the average annual rainfall in West Palm Beach. *S. rotundifolius* is usually found in wet locations including swamp forest, mangrove margins, rainforest, and along river courses.

S. rotundifolius is a solitary palm. In habitat they can emerge from the forest canopy and reach heights up to 150 feet. There's little chance of it growing that tall in Palm Beach County. This is a medium sized palm not much larger than the common Chinese Fan Palm, *Livistona chinensis*.

S. rotundifolius has large round costapalmate fronds that can measure up to 7' across. When young, the leaves are shallowly divided and they rival *Kerriodoxa elegans* in beauty. As the palm gains height the fronds may divide more deeply and become a little smaller. Being a variable species, the leaf tips may be either stiff or pendulous. The petioles are typically armed with black recurved spines, but some palms may have unarmed petioles, or may lose spines as it ages. The leaves display a prominent hastula measuring to 1" high.

S. rotundifolius is a monoecious palm which produce yellow hermaphroditic flowers. The inflorescences do not extend beyond the fronds. The fruit color and size is also variable. The globose fruit measure between ½ and 1" across. Fruit color starts out yellow, but may ripen to orange-red, red, dark violet, or bluish-black. It flowers and fruits all year long.

Aside from the beautiful, glossy, large, round leaves, the other major attraction of this palm is its interesting crisscross pattern of leaf base fibers. There are few palms which rival such an attractive pattern of fibers. Eventually the leaf bases do fall away, but they leave behind reddish leaf scars which are also quite attractive.

Most local palm enthusiasts know *Saribus rotundifolius* either as *Livistona rotundifolia* or *Livistona robinsoniana*. My experience with this palm is based on ones purchased as *Livistona robinsoniana*. That was the palm with distinctive stem rings and incredible leaf base fibers that I first saw at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden. Those palms were some of our first plantings in our garden back in 1993. *Livistona rotundifolia* was a common palm planted in commercial settings as a groundcover. Those palms had the same beautiful glossy leaves as *L. robinsoniana*, but I don't remember seeing any of those palms grow tall enough to observe their stems or fiber. Maybe once they outlived their usefulness as a groundcover they were removed.

We have several *S. rotundifolius* growing in our garden. They are 24, 10 and 5 years old. We are lucky to have this palm growing at different stages of maturity. All are beautiful. The youngest one resembles *Kerriodoxa elegans*. The middle age one is beginning to reach for the sky and will soon be showing off its crisscross leaf base fibers. The oldest one measures 15' to the lowest frond and has dropped most of the old leaf bases. The stem measures 8" in diameter at waist level.

I would classify this palm as a medium to slow grower in Palm Beach County. Even though it's not a fast vertical grower, it is a vigorous grower and looks impressive at all stages. With recommended fertilization and regular irrigation, our palms have never developed nutritional deficiencies. They have never been affected by winter low temperatures since 1993. Reference books rate it hardy to zone 10a, but John Kennedy has grown this palm successfully for 18 years, without regular irrigation, in Vero Beach- zone 9b. Being a swamp palm, it would be happiest planted in a wet, low lying area with regular irrigation. Immature palms are most impressive when planted in the shade, but can also grow well with full exposure to the sun. In any case, it will reach for the sky and eventually grow through any canopy that you have.

To sum up, this palm loves growing in our sandy soil. If you live in Western Palm Beach County and have marl soil, it would probably be even be more vigorous. It's also a strong grower on oolitic limestone in Miami. With fertilization and irrigation it will reward you with a beautiful crown of leaves at all stages of growth. I consider it an anchor palm which looks great all year long.



Saribus rotundifolius- 10 years old (above),
5 years old (below) in Beck Garden



S. rotundifolius- costa in Beck Garden (above)
S. rotundifolius- 18 years old in
Kennedy Garden (below)





Saribus rotundifolius- leaf underside side



Saribus rotundifolius 24 years old in Beck Garden



Saribus rotundifolius- leaf topside



Saribus rotundifolius- hastula



Saribus rotundifolius- petiole



Saribus rotundifolius- crisscross leaf fiber in Kennedy Garden



Saribus rotundifolius- reddish leaf scars in Beck Garden