

GROWING *Encephalartos gratus* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Dale Holton

This cycad was first discovered in 1899, in Malawi, a landlocked country in southeast Africa. In Latin, the word “gratus” means pleasing or welcome. The natural habitat for this cycad is rocky ravines and river banks, and sometimes grows with no apparent soil. The plants are frequently defoliated by annual grass fires. They grow at elevations of 2,200-3,000 feet, with annual rainfall of 39-69 inches. *E. gratus* is most closely related to *E. hildebrandtii*. These plants enjoy full sun, although they will grow in shade. They will tolerate extended rainfall quite well.



Encephalartos gratus growing in Dale Holton's yard.

Photograph by Dale Holton

This is an easy plant to grow and requires minimal care. They do get quite large over time and should be located in a spot where they won't interfere with walkways. The mature leaves can be as much as 6-10 feet long and are dark green. *E. gratus* is a very fast grower and in just 6-8 years can have a trunk more than 12 inches wide and more than 12 inches tall. There is an old plant in Fairchild Tropical garden that would take about four people to put their arms around it.

E. gratus was one of my first cycads. In about 1991, I planted three small plants on the south side of my house. Not really understanding how large they got, I planted them too close together and too close to the house. Now I need to move one plant and move and sell another plant as I have two males and one female. I most likely will do the moving this winter as its best done during cooler weather to avoid rot problems.

The male cones are a dark brown with yellow on the inside, and the female cones are orange. The male plants can produce several cones at one time and the female plants usually produce one cone until they get large, then they can produce one or more cones. Each female cone can have 300-400 seeds. With hand pollination, fifty percent or more will grow.

This is an excellent plant for anyone who has the room. They can usually be obtained from any nursery that sells cycads.



Encephalartos gratus female cone

Photograph by Dale Holton



Encephalartos gratus male cone
Photograph by Dale Holton



Encephalartos gratus planted in the Beck garden in 1993.
Photograph by Charlie Beck



Encephalartos gratus growing
at Flamingo Gardens
Photograph by Charlie Beck