

GROWING
Encephalartos kisanbo
IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Encephalartos kisanbo is a large cycad native to Kenya. It was discovered in 1970, was named in 1977, and was officially described in 1989. Its native habitat is restricted to an area estimated to be only 400 acres. It occurs at elevations of 2,600-3,400' in partial shade on dry bushland. In 2003 it was estimated that only 5,200 individual plants remained in habitat. *E. kisanbo* is considered endangered due to land clearing for subsistence farming and charcoal production.

E. kisanbo is a large cycad with stems which can reach 7' tall and grow 2' in diameter. Leaves can measure up to 12' long. This cycad rarely suckers from the base so it has a neat appearance. Cones are yellow to orange and are very attractive. The base of the rachis is swollen and leaf scars are diamond shaped. This cycad is most closely related to *E. hildebrandtii*.

We have a single specimen of *E. kisanbo* planted in our garden. It was planted 18 years ago and has grown a stem which measures 28" in diameter and 2' tall. The leaves measure 9' long and the cones are 2' long. Our specimen is planted in full sun in an area which floods after repeated heavy rainfall. Even though its native habitat is dry and lightly shaded, our plant seems to thrive in moist soil and full sun.

Back in 1995, I was not familiar with this cycad. It was only scientifically described 6 years prior to its planting in our garden. Dale Holton was probably the first nurseryman in the area to sell this cycad. Dale still offers this plant for sale at our sponsor, Holton Nursery. I gave it a try and I've been rewarded with a stand-out plant. Dale told me that *E. kisanbo* is one of the top three *Encephalartos* species which can be grown in Palm Beach County. The other two species that rival *E. kisanbo* in vigor are *E. gratus* and *E. hildebrandtii*. I would add *E. ferox* to that list. Norm Moody had a beautiful specimen of *E. kisanbo* growing in full shade. This cycad reportedly grows much faster in full sun. It flushes new leaves more often and cones quicker in full sun but Norm's plant in full shade was sure impressive.

We are lucky that *E. kisanbo* is still available for sale in our area. This is a cycad that can be a focal point in your garden. It is a strong grower in our sandy soils. It looks good at any size but is really impressive when mature. It grows well in sun or shade, and both dry or moist soil. It has never displayed micro-nutritional deficiency in our garden when fertilized at the recommended rate. I'm sure that Norm Moody's specimen was rarely fertilized with more than composted horse manure, and his plant looked great. The colorful cones draw attention and minimal suckering from the base translates to easy maintenance. If you have the room for this large cycad, I recommend that you buy yours before the supply is exhausted.

Encephalartos kisambo
Photos by Charlie Beck



Petiole base



Specimen growing in full sun
at the Beck garden.



LEFT: Specimen growing in full
shade at Norm Moody's garden in
2011.

RIGHT: Diamond shaped leaf
scars

