

GROWING
Hydriastele dransfieldii
IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Hydriastele dransfieldii is native to Biak Island off the northwestern coast of New Guinea. Biak Island is located at 1 degree north of the equator, so this palm is of truly tropical origin. Average annual rainfall is 122 inches. In its native habitat, *H. dransfieldii* is found from sea level to an elevation of 1000'. It grows on areas with very thin soil over limestone rock. This palm is reported to grow on pure limestone, rooted into the cracks.

Hydriastele dransfieldii was originally named *Siphokentia dransfieldii* in 2000. The species name honors the renowned British palm taxonomist John Dransfield, of the Royal Botanic Garden, Kew. *Siphokentia*, *Gulubia*, and *Gronophyllum* were all lumped into the genus *Hydriastele*. Over the years I planted several species of all four of these genera. Generally I found all of them ill-suited for growing in the sandy soil of Palm Beach County. All of my plantings either succumbed, or they struggled and required repeated supplemental applications of minor elements. All of my specimens of *Gulubia* and *Gronophyllum* succumbed to cold winter temperatures.

Hydriastele dransfieldii has been a pleasant surprise in our garden. Our single specimen was planted only one year ago, so it has only experienced our mild 2014-2015 winter season. Even though its hardiness has not been tested by a cold winter, such as 2009-2010, I still highly recommend this palm based on its vigorous growth and its unique attractive appearance.

Hydriastele dransfieldii is a small, monoecious, solitary palm. It grows very stiff leaflets which are wide and unevenly spaced. Our specimen's fronds measure 5' long including the petiole. Leaflets vary in width but the widest leaflet can measure up to 10" wide and 30" long. The terminal leaflets are bifid in form and have a jagged edge. The fronds emerge with an emerald green color and then mature to a very dark green. Emergent leaves have dark peach colored petioles and rachis. As the leaf matures, the petioles darken to a dark brown. This coloration on the rachis and petiole is due to the presence of indumentum (hairs and/or scales). The sheath is also covered by this same colorful indumentum. A stem is forming on our specimen and it measures a diameter of 1-1/2 inches. Ultimate height of *H. dransfieldii* is 6 feet.

In our garden, we've have had an issue with our irrigation well. This issue caused our garden to grow without any supplemental irrigation for over 2 months. Some palms in our garden have sharply declined due to this lack of irrigation but *H. dransfieldii* is not one of them. It appears that this palm has a degree of drought tolerance once established.

Our specimen is planted in shell rock which was brought in to form a raised pad for our home. This soil is highly alkaline. If you don't have an alkaline area in your garden you might try incorporating pea gravel into the soil. Another method is to plant this palm close to your house foundation where lime leaches from the concrete. Who knows? Maybe this palm will thrive in our native sandy soil. It's certainly worth a try.

Availability of *H. dransfieldii* is not good. I know Jeff Marcus of Floribunda Palms and Exotics occasionally offers seedlings for sale. It is not presently on his price list, but I'll try to obtain a few of these for future Palm Beach Palm and Cycad Society auctions.

Hydiastele dransfieldii



Bottom side of frond



Colorful rachis and petiole



Upper side of frond