

GROWING *Kerriodoxa elegans* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Kerriodoxa elegans is a solitary dioecious palm native to peninsular Thailand. It occurs in only two localities - Phuket and Khao Sok National Park. The latitude of its range is 8-9 degrees north which is well within the tropical limit of 23.5 degrees north. The palmate leaves can grow up to 8 feet in diameter. The leaves are circular and are shortly split. The spear leaf opens as it emerges from the bud unlike most palms that grow the spear leaf clear of the bud before opening. The leaf underside is silvery white and the unarmed petioles are deep purple or black. The stems are short and are sometimes subterranean. In habitat the stems can grow to 20 feet tall and measure 6-8 inches in diameter.

In habitat this palm grows at elevations of 300 to 1,000 feet in areas of high rainfall (100 to 130 inches/year). The underlying substrate is limestone but the topsoil is reported to be sandy and highly acidic due to the leaf litter. The soil is well drained.

We have six specimens of *K. elegans* planted in our garden. Five were planted 18 years ago and one was planted 16 years ago. The oldest five were planted in a low lying area prone to flooding after repeated heavy rainfall. The youngest specimen was planted in a raised area of the garden. The youngest palm has outgrown the other five which leads me to believe that good soil drainage is advantageous. All six of our palms are planted in the shade. There is quite a range in growth rates. I gage growth rate by leaf size rather than stem height because it takes many years for stems to develop. Our largest leaf measures 5 1/2 feet in diameter. The smallest specimen's leaf measures just 2 1/2 feet in diameter. That's quite a variation for palms that are 16 to 18 years old. I assume that there is great amount of genetic variability within this species of palm. The lowest lying of our palms has the smallest leaves so good drainage is an important factor. We have also noticed a slight yellowing of the fronds at times. I have supplemented the fertilizer with extra iron and dolomite which has helped. I have not noticed any damage to our specimens due to cold weather. Considering how close these palms grow to the equator, it is surprising how well they grow in sub-tropical areas.

The *K. elegans* planted at Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden have had a much faster growth rate than our plants. Those specimens are planted in limestone with excellent drainage. As you can see on the cover photo, those plants have produced several feet of stem and their leaves measure more than 8 feet across. I'm sure that those palms receive less fertilizer and irrigation than the ones in our garden but their growth rate is much better. If I were to plant a new specimen of *K. elegans*, I would amend the soil with pea gravel and I would mound up the soil to improve drainage. Our palm society donated several specimens of *K. elegans* to the Mounts Botanical Garden. Those were planted on a steep incline on the south side of the lake. It will be interesting to see how these palms grow at that location.

The most beautiful specimen of *K. elegans* I've seen was at Norm Moody's garden (see photo on page 7). This palm had great color and huge leaves. I know Norm did not apply chemical fertilizer to his palms as recommended by IFAS. I do know that he did apply horse manure as a nutrient source. If you compare this practice to this palm's natural habitat, highly organic, acid sand over limestone, maybe the acidic horse manure was the cause of its robust growth.

I recommend all palm enthusiasts grow this palm. A healthy specimen is unmatched in beauty. The full circle leaves are an impressive sight. The leaf silver underside contrasts nicely with the near



K. elegans
at Fairchild Tropical Botanical
Garden.

black petioles. Although the footprint of this palm can be large if well grown, it will never grow to an out-of-scale height. Our Palm and Cycad Society has purchased several of these palms for the year end palm give away. I hope you add to your collection with one of these palms.



ABOVE AND BELOW: 18 year old *K. elegans* growing in the Beck garden.

(Photos by Charlie Beck)



ABOVE: *K. elegans* growing in Townsville Palmetum, Townsville, Australia

BELOW: *K. elegans* growing in Norm Moody's garden.

(Photos by Charlie Beck)

