

# GROWING *Licuala* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

*Submitted by Paul Craft*

*Licualas* are unquestionably among my favorite palms to grow. With over 150 taxa in the genus, it is also one of the most diverse of all palm genera. Some grow 60 feet or more in habitat, such as *Licuala ramsayi*, while others are Lilliputian palms, like *Licuala triphylla*, staying less than a foot tall. Most are solitary trunked species, but there are a few clumping varieties as well. Leaves can be undivided or split into a myriad array of deeply cut segments. A few exhibit a secondary petiole bearing one additional segment or occasionally two. Leaf shape can be completely circular or wedge shaped. Leaf stems are generally armed with small teeth, and a few can be treacherous to unprotected wayward fingers. Fruit is almost always orange to deep red and can put on quite a showy display. An interesting side note is *Johannesteijsmannia* is so closely related to *Licuala*, that there has been talk of lumping the two genera together.



*Licuala peltata* var. *sumawongii*  
at growing at Fairchild Tropical  
Gardens in 2004

*Photograph by Paul Craft*

Because of their highly ornamental value, it is no wonder why *Licualas* are so sought after by enthusiasts. When used in groupings, many of the medium to larger species, such as *L. ramsayi* and *L. grandis*, are stunningly dramatic. Likewise, a viewer may well be taken aback coming upon a solitary specimen of *Licuala peltata sumawongii* in a landscape with its 6 foot undivided leaves. Small species, such as *L. mattanensis* 'Mapu', and *L. orbicularis*, are gorgeous in cozy settings to be viewed close-up. One of the most gorgeous sights I have seen is the use of grouping of *Licuala grandis* used under a cluster of *Chambeyronia macrocarpa*. No matter how used, *Licualas* will always draw the viewer's eye and be strong focal points in the landscape. Many make excellent container specimens as

well.

Most species come from Southeast Asia, but their range is from Vanuatu west to India and Australia north to China. They are all shade lovers, although *Licuala spinosa* can handle full sun very well. *Licuala peltata sumawongii*, *L. grandis* and *L. ramsayi* can also handle a great deal of sun, especially when older. All will tend to be a bit more yellowish green in sunshine rather than deep forest green when grown in shade. Virtually all do best in acidic soils, but a number tolerate the alkaline soils of South Florida very well. *Licualas* like it wet and never appreciate any semblance of a drought. Some species grow naturally in areas that are swampy at least part of the year. A few have developed specialty aerating roots, called pneumatophores, that reach up through the water of swampy habitats to absorb oxygen. *Licuala ramsayi* and *L. peltata sumawongii* are examples. As well as being water lovers, *Licualas* appreciate relatively high humidity year round. Many of the most unusual species come from areas of high humidity and rainfall year round. These species find it difficult to adapt to areas like California or even South Florida with its winter dry season. None are particularly cold hardy. Several species can tolerate the occasional very short cold snap to 30 degrees or perhaps a degree or two lower, but will not tolerate prolonged cold temperatures in the mid to high 30s. In South Florida, the cold hardiest species seems to be *Licuala spinosa*.

There are a number of species grown in cultivation with more being tried all the time. Probably the most common species in cultivation is *Licuala grandis*, also called the ruffled fan palm. This native of Vanuatu and the Solomons is one of the easiest to grow and does very well as either a landscape or

container plant. I think they look best when planted in odd numbered groupings of staggered heights. The collage of orbicular leaves from a grouping is simply spectacular. It has been used with good success as an interior plant tolerating relatively low humidity.

*Licuala peltata* var. *sumawongii* is another undivided leaf species that dwarfs *L. grandis*. Under ideal conditions, its leaves can be 6 feet across or more. It will tolerate a fair amount of sun, but will look best under a high canopy of shade that offers protection from winds that otherwise may tatter its rather thin leaves. It will stand out wherever placed in the garden and will grow reasonably fast, for a *Licuala*, given adequate water. Often referred to as *Licuala elegans*, this is actually a valid name of a small species found in Sumatra that has yet to find its way into cultivation. For that reason, *L. elegans* should not be used when referring to *L. peltata* var. *sumawongii*. *Licuala peltata* var. *peltata* is equally impressive with regularly split leaves.

Two other undivided leafed *Licualas* are well worth mentioning here. *Licuala orbicularis* is a small palm that looks to get perhaps 3 feet tall in cultivation. It holds its leaves tightly and is not an easy species to grow. Many growers have tried and had varying degrees of success. Those lucky people in Hawaii, who can mimic most closely this palm's native habitat, have had the best success. It wants constant high humidity, warm temperatures, good drainage, acid soil, and ample water. Here in Florida, the best success has been to grow it as a container plant and the further south you are, the easier it is to keep it looking good. The best ones I have seen have been grown in containers in the Florida Keys.

One *Licuala* that I am particularly enamored with is *Licuala cordata*. I first saw this palm growing in a garden in upper Queensland. It is not a large palm, but may get bigger than *L. orbicularis*. The leaves are extremely stiff with a texture similar to that of corrugated cardboard. It is quite rare in cultivation and most people lucky enough to have tried growing it, have not found it easy to grow. It may well need similar conditions to that of *L. orbicularis*. Only a handful of cultivated plants are producing a very limited amount of seed, so it may take awhile before many growers are able to attempt growing *L. cordata*. There is a split leaf form of this species as well.

*Licuala spinosa* is the most recognizable clumping species. It is a true water lover and thrives when grown on the edges of ponds or streams where it can easily get its roots into plentiful water. It is widely cultivated and often found growing in full sun, where it does very well if its water needs are met. I have seen clumps over 20 feet tall by 20 feet wide in Central America. The long fruiting bracts with clusters of bright red fruit arching down beyond the foliage adds to the palm's beauty. This is a palm that tolerates either acidic or alkaline soils and seems to care most that it can get its feet into water.

Most *Licualas* have split leaves, but the width of the segments, how deeply divided they are, diameter of the leaf, and whether the leaf is orbicular or wedge shaped varies remarkably.

There are a number of split-leaf species in cultivation. Anyone who has been to the *Licuala ramsayi* swamps of Queensland will never forget the experience. It is cathedral-like where one finds himself speaking in hushed tones and whispers. The palms form a dazzling spectacle 60 feet overhead that can hypnotize the viewer. In cultivation, *L. ramsayi* does very well when given plentiful water and grows relatively quickly. It prefers acid soils, but will tolerate some alkalinity. I think of its growing conditions of being much like that of *L. grandis*.

*Licuala lauterbachii* has been around a long time and is often overlooked for newer species coming on the scene. It is a proven performer that does well in both acid and alkaline soil that has a humusy top layer. There are different forms with either wider or narrower leaflets as well as larger or smaller diameter leaves. It is another that I think looks best in a grouping of 3 or more plants of staggered heights. Its rate of growth is similar to *L. grandis* and it can be a charming container plant.

Another species that has been around a long time is *Licuala paludosa*. When young, it can look similar to some forms of *L. lauterbachii*. Its wider and stiffer leaf segments as well as overall larger size give it away when older. Occasionally, this species clumps. Conditions for growing are the same as *L. grandis* and *L. lauterbachii*.

A newer species that comes from Thailand is *Licuala distans*. This species has not been in cultivation very long and growers are still learning about its needs. To date, it holds a great deal of promise for South Florida and elsewhere. It definitely likes the wet areas surrounding Hilo, Hawaii. Its

deeply divided orbicular leaves, with each segment having regular deep indents on the end, and generally graceful habit make this an enthralling addition to the landscape.

*Licuala mattanensis* 'Mapu' is a palm that most palm lovers know and will try at least once. This dwarf form, of a uniformly green species, has mottled leaves that make it an exceptionally delightful addition to an intimate spot in the garden where one can see it up close. It is not an easy species to grow though, and seems best suited for wet parts of Hawaii with growing conditions like *L. orbicularis*. In South Florida, it can be grown in containers and occasionally makes it for a couple years in the landscape, but rarely stays healthy for an extended time. Where I have seen this grown in groupings, it is a uniquely picturesque groundcover. *Licuala radula* is another mottled species that grows somewhat larger and sometimes clumps. Its leaves are generally not so strikingly mottled, with fewer, larger segments.

The diminutive, *Licuala triphylla*, has only 3, to sometimes 5, small wedge shaped leaflets with the overall plant maturing at 8 or so inches tall. In deep shade, the leaves are extended on longer leaf stems. This is a species found on the forest floor of Malaysia and Thailand. In South Florida, it seems best suited in containers. It requires well-drained acidic soil and ample water. This little beauty does not appreciate the lower humidity of our dry season. It does make for a delightful conversation piece as a little container plant.

Among other split leaf species that are finding their way into gardens are *Licuala naumanii*, *L. platydactyla*, and *L. parviflora*. All are solitary trunked species with *L. naumanii* seemingly the fastest growing as well as being the tallest palm. The other two hail from Papua, New Guinea and tend to be slower growing and shorter at maturity. They all prefer acidic soils, but are being tried out in the alkaline soils of South Florida to see how they adapt. I believe all show great promise as landscape plants.

More species are showing up in cultivation every year, and while not all will be widely adapted to landscapes everywhere, some will undoubtedly become excellent additions to gardens. After all, it is the goal of every palmtut to discover a new *Licuala* or other palm species that grows well in his or her landscape. It is part of what makes growing plants an enjoyable and rewarding experience.



*Licuala spinosa* growing  
in the Florida Keys in 1980  
*Photograph by Paul Craft*



*Licuala cordata* growing in Jeff  
Marcus' garden in Hawaii in 2009  
*Photograph by Paul Craft*



*Licuala orbicularis* growing in  
Pauleen Sullivan's garden in  
Kopoho, Hawaii in 2004  
*Photograph by Paul Craft*





*Licuala mapu* growing in Jerry Andersen's garden in Hawaii in 1980

*Photograph by Paul Craft*



*Licuala distans* growing in Jeff Marcus' garden in Hawaii in 2004

*Photograph by Paul Craft*

### UNCOMMON *LICUALAS* THAT GROW WELL IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

*Licuala naumanii* growing in the Beck garden in 2009

*Photograph by Charlie Beck*



*Licuala glabra* growing in the Beck garden in 2009

*Photograph by Charlie Beck*

