

GROWING *Livistona saribus* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by John Kennedy

After a near-death (?) freeze experience, many palm collectors decide—for a while, anyway—to be sensible, to plant only species that won't be damaged or killed in cold snaps. Of course, 'cold snap' may be too mild a term for my experience of last winter: nine nights below freezing in January and February. Mostly this was no lower than 30° for an hour or two, but once to 27°. One night was 10 hours below freezing; daytime temperatures seldom got above the 50s for most of two months.



Livistona saribus growing in Dale Holton's garden.

(Photo by Charlie Beck)

I do recommend, as an undamaged survivor for more than 25 years, *Livistona saribus*, the Taraw Palm.

In the 1980s, every winter in Vero brought as many as three or four freezes, with temperatures as low as 26°, at least briefly. The most memorable cold was on Christmas Eve night—actually, Christmas morning—in 1989, when the temperature plunged to 18° at my house, rose that day to maybe 40° after 12 hours below freezing. Christmas night dipped again, but only into (I think) the upper 20s. Warmth, meaning 70°, didn't return for four days, though successive nights were in the 40s. Do understand that my memories—except of that single horrifying 18°—remain mercifully murky and blocked. It was helpful that there were no further freezes later in the winter.

For a month, the prevailing odor in Vero Beach was of rotting vegetation. Huge piles of dead and decaying bougainvillea, crotons, ixora, hibiscus, etc., royal and coconut palms (farthest north for these on the coast). Christmas Palms, *Adonidia*,

disappeared from almost every lawn, only to return a few years ago: most residents have been here no longer than 5-6 years, so have no historic memory of the Christmas 1989 horrors.

I had planted in my back yard in 1982, a 1-gallon *Livistona saribus* purchased from a vendor at the Fairchild sale. I was a novice in palms, only about two years, knew next to nothing. The little palm was planted in the open, no cover, had grown to three feet high when that 18° arrived, seven years later. To my amazement and relief, it had no damage whatsoever, covered only with a pillow case.

This kind of cold hardiness is nothing short of amazing in a coastal-plain palm native to Southeast Asia—Malaya, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam. It has continued to grow, is now 40 feet tall, with an 18-inch trunk, and, at a glance, might be taken for a medium size *Washingtonia*. It was completely untouched by last winter's freezing temperatures and lengthy overall chilliness.

The bright green deeply costapalmate 3-foot leaves seem longer than wide, and droop more than half the segment length. Growth is moderate, with good response to palm fertilizer. Nice looking, yes, but no outstanding showy features aside from the downward-pointing, elaborate spines on the 5-foot petioles. These look to me like a Javanese *kris*, to others like shark's teeth, with a wide base and curved long point. But mustn't forget the fruit, a striking metallic blue, thin over a large seed; the squirrels eat the fruit covering, dropping the cleaned seeds on the ground.

There is a form of the Taraw Palm with reddish petioles, very decorative, but apparently not as cold hardy as the more familiar form (mine) with green petioles.

I have often recommended *Livistona saribus* as a substitute for *Washingtonia*. It is readily available but doesn't grow out of proportion to its surroundings. Think of all those 4-story *Washingtonia*

palms with skinny trunks and tiny crowns (dustmops), next to a flat-roofed Florida house! Taraw Palm has a thicker trunk and a bigger crown: mine now 18 feet across. Dead leaves don't drop off *L. saribus* immediately, so require the attention of those neatly inclined, but are more reachable than a *Washingtonia* palm. They do fall eventually, and the few hanging down don't look as messy as on a *Washingtonia*.

My experience has been that the leaf bases remain on the palm until it is about 15 years old, adding to trunk dimensions, then (magically?) some signal is given and they all begin to come off, revealing a grayish brown trunk marked with leaf scars.

What did I do right, unknowingly, with this palm? My policy of benign neglect worked out (in this instance). Where I planted it was a low point in my backyard, which is the low point for the entire block of half-acre lots, four on 13th Street (my unpaved street) and four on 12th Place to the south (another unpaved street). After a hard rain there is often several inches of water in the back for a day or two and, of course, the water table isn't all that far down anyway. The little Taraw Palm didn't remain in the open for long before the smallish laurel oak on the neighbor's property behind became a large laurel oak, shading it out. At the same time, the tree provided some cover to keep the dampness maybe a bit longer than before.



Livistona saribus growing in John Kennedy's garden in Vero Beach.

(Photo by John Kennedy)

The palm began to lean outward to escape the shade; the tree grew even bigger. However, the palm won when the tree was trashed in the two 2004 hurricanes that hit Vero Beach. With the cover removed, the palm zoomed up and, now, with the tree fully recovered, remains above it.

Volunteers have appeared all around; several I've left where they are, not quite adult leaves, not quite a trunk yet. Small, two-leaf seedlings I have often pulled up, prior to my retirement, and put into plastic cups—names written on the side—to hand out as freebies to my community-college students. But that's another story.



Livistona saribus petiole

(Photo by John Kennedy)



Fifteen foot high *Livistona saribus* with leaf bases growing in Mike Dahme's garden in Grant, Brevard County.

(Photo by John Kennedy)