

GROWING *Mauritia flexuosa* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Mauritia flexuosa is a very large palm with deeply segmented palmate leaves and rounded petioles. In habitat, this dioecious palm grows 15 foot wide leaves on petioles 30 feet long. The stems can reach 80 feet tall. Its natural range is wet areas in Northern South America east of the Andes and also reaching into Trinidad. It usually grows in permanently swampy areas. This palm provides food and nesting sites for Macaws (See photo on back cover). Fish, turtles, tortoises, agoutis, peccares, deer, pacas, and iguanas also eat its fruit.



Mauritia flexuosa planted in Richard Moyroud's garden

I recently attended a meeting of the South Florida Palm Society and it was mentioned that *Mauritia* did not grow in South Florida. I knew the speaker was not aware of the fine specimens growing at Richard Moyroud's Mesozoic Landscapes Nursery in Palm Beach County. The nursery is located near Hypoluxo Road west of Rt. 441 – not considered a warm location. I saw these palms planted at his nursery several years ago when I went out there to purchase some native plants. I heard reports that Richard's *Mauritia* palms survived our record cold winter, so I called Richard to get a status report. He invited me to come out to the nursery to see for myself. He has specimens growing in the nursery and in a private 3 acre swamp garden located behind the nursery which is off limits to his customers. This was a rare opportunity to have Richard lead me on a tour of his swamp garden.

The acquisition of Richard's *Mauritia* is an interesting story. In 1929, David Fairchild planted *Mauritia flexuosa* (grown from seed collected in Trinidad) within a sink hole at the old USDA property located near Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden. *Mauritia* is usually considered impossible to grow in the Miami area due to the alkaline soil, but when planted in a sink hole which traps copious amounts of organic matter, the PH is brought to an acceptable range due to the heavy build up of organic humus, and more water is available. These same palms produced seed 60 years later. Richard obtained *Mauritia* seed from these plants around 1990. In 1992, Hurricane Andrew wiped out the 63 year old *Mauritia* palms at the USDA property. Richard sprouted the seeds and planted his first *Mauritias* in 1990. Fortunately, this was after the record cold temperatures of the 1989 freeze. Since the original planting, Richard has brought back seed from his travels to Peru and Guiana and has planted 60 to 70 *Mauritia* palms on his property. He lost some specimens due to Hurricane Wilma but many other palms flourished. Not every *Mauritia* Richard planted survived and some grew more rapidly than others. It is amazing after our record cold winter that some of his *Mauritia* seem unfazed.

Richard informed me that many tropical plants deemed too cold sensitive to grow in Palm Beach County can be successfully grown. The important consideration is to try to duplicate growing conditions of the palm's native range and don't just plant one plant and be discouraged if it does not thrive. It's best to plant several plants because there is a wide genetic diversity which may surprise you with favorable growth.

Richard's swamp palm collection had many other interesting palms. He had some *Euterpe oleracea* which survived the winter even though most were severely damaged. *Euterpe edulis* were undamaged. A robust *Colpothrinax wrightii* was in its full glory. *Manicaria* and *Versaffeltia* were

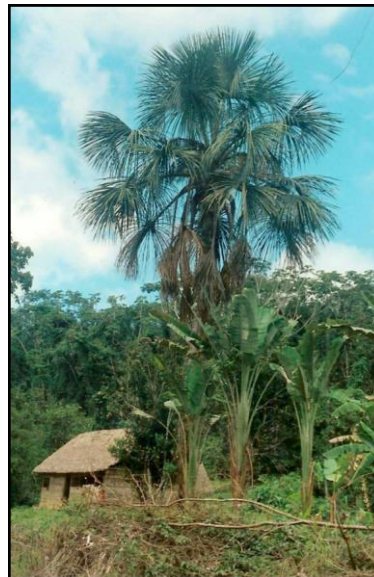
killed by the winter temperatures. In 1985, Richard obtained a permit to collect seeds of the true Florida native Royal Palm from the Fakahatchee Strand. He has grown these *Roystonea* to perfection on raised areas in his swamp garden. I was amazed to see Richard growing *Iriartea* and *Socratea*. They survived the winter with additional cold protection. *Calyptronoma rivalis* looked fine. Richard had an interesting *Jubaea* X *Butia* hybrid growing outside the swamp. It had the typical *Jubaea* leaf tip which folded back on itself (See photo on left). *Licuala grandis* and *Licuala ramsayi* grew side by side in the swamp (See photos on pages 10 and 11). The *L. grandis* was the most robust specimen I have ever seen.

I have ordered many *Mauritia* palms from a Hawaiian nursery. They all declined rapidly even though planted in a swampy location. Last summer, I planted another 3 gallon *Mauritia* obtained from Mike Harris' Caribbean Palm Nursery. I planted it in a drainage ditch which can hold water 1 to 3 feet deep for weeks at a time. The palm was planted in an area not easily accessible so I did not check on it as our winter progressed. I was sure it would succumb to the cold. Finally, in April I checked this *Mauritia* and was surprised to find it unfazed by the cold. This palm must have been grown from an unusually cold hardy batch of seeds because Mike Harris informed me that he too planted specimens in the ground at his Loxahatchee nursery and they also survived the winter. I quickly purchased another *Mauritia* from Mike because he still had potted plants from the same seed batch.

I encourage Palm Society members with wet areas in their garden to try a *Mauritia flexuosa*. It is well worth the try. For smaller gardens with wet areas, there is a similar genus *Mauritiella* which also has rounded petioles and a similar deeply divided leaf. This palm is a clumper, is more cold hardy, and has an interesting trunk with thorns (See photos on page 11). I have included some photos of *Mauritia flexuosa* and *Mauritiella* taken during our trip to Venezuela.

Note: Richard Moyroud has vast and impressive experience. In 1981, he was a founding member of the Native Plant Society and served as its president in the mid 1980s. He was the original horticulturist/botanist at Gemini Gardens from 1985 until 1994. In 1986, he was a founding

member of the Association of Florida Native Nurseries. He was an active member of the team that worked on two Palm Beach County Land Conservation Bond Referendums passed in 1991 and 2000. He is also an appointee to the State Endangered Plant Advisory Council and the county Natural Areas Management Advisory Committee. He has grown palms for more than 30 years and is a highly respected native plant expert who specializes in native plant restoration. His **Mesozoic Landscapes Nursery** is well stocked with a wide variety of native plants as well as some palms. Richard is well traveled throughout the new world tropics and has collected many seed from habitat.



Mauritia flexuosa growing in habitat in Venezuela



Mauritia flexuosa and native Royal Palm growing in Richard's garden

All photographs for this article were provided by Charlie Beck.



Mauritiella sp. growing in Venezuela



Thorny trunk of *Mauritiella* sp.



Colpothrinax wrightii
in Richard's nursery



Richard Moyroud lending scale to a
Licuala grandis planted in the swamp



Euterpe oleracea in swamp area



Licuala ramsayi in Rihard's swamp



Jubaea X Butia hybrid growing at Mesozoic Landscapes Nursery



Leaf detail of *Jubaea X Butia* hybrid growing at Mesozoic Landscapes Nursery



Stilt roots of a *Socratea exorrhzia* growing at Mesozoic Landscapes Nursery



Socratea exorrhzia growing at Mesozoic Landscapes Nursery