

GROWING

The Tender Tropicals: *Verschaffeltia splendida*

IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

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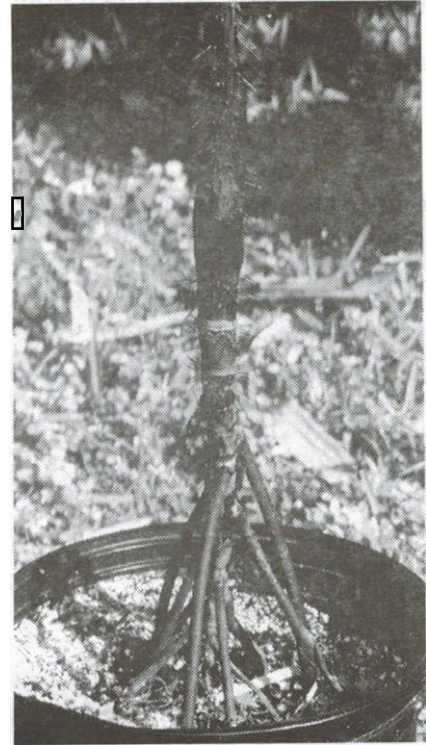
One of the most impressive of all palms is *Verschaffeltia splendida*. It is well worth the special care it requires, as in dragging plants inside should the temperature drop below 40 degrees. There are many features of *Verschaffeltia splendida* which make it a favorite among collectors. The large undivided leaves which are almost as wide as they are long are very striking. The leaf stem is reddish orange, and the leaf blade is a shiny dark green if grown in the shade. In large palms, however, the leaf splits readily by the wind into pinnate segments.

Another interesting feature of *Verschaffeltia* is the black spiny crownshaft and spiny ringed trunk, which is held up high on black stilt roots. These stilt roots can be as high as 3 feet off the ground. Some growers repot *Verschaffeltia* by placing the palm near the bottom of the new pot, and thus cover up most of the stilt roots with the new soil. This keeps the roots warmer and more protected in cold weather. As the palm gets larger, the roots get longer also, making this practice difficult without very deep pots. But by then the larger palm can withstand cold weather a little bit easier.

Young *Verschaffeltia splendida* are very tender, with palms burned or killed at around 45 degrees. Larger palms in the 5 to 7 gallon range can usually take low 40's or high 30's if protected from the cold wind. Very large palms in the ground with their stilt roots protected by blankets or mounds of mulch might survive a light freeze if in a protected spot. But I don't know of any in South Florida that have been tested on this yet.

It would be best to keep *Verschaffeltia splendida* potted until it is just too big to keep in a heated/protected shade house or dragged inside the house during a cold snap.

If you are lucky enough to have grown one too big to keep in a pot, plant it in the warmest and most protected spot you can. At this size it can take full sun, although it looks better if given some light shade. Then go buy a cheap small one to grow for a replacement should your big one not make it through our next freeze. Small plants are cheap now that more seeds are



available, and no collector would want to be without at least one of these beauties around.

Verschaffeltia splendida is endemic to the Seychelle Islands, along with *Roscheria* and *Lodoicea* (the Double Coconut). It grows on steep hillsides between 1000 and 2000 feet elevation, often in rocky soils. It grows to 80 feet in height, but is usually much less. The trunk is only 6 inches in diameter and tapers at the top. The petiole is short and the recurved leaves can be 5-8 feet long and up to 4 feet wide. The much branched inflorescences arise among the leaves and bear 1 inch diameter green to brown fruits. These germinate easily with heat in 2-3 months.

In the Seychelles the trunks were split and used for the walls of small buildings and for water gutters. Their numbers have been reduced but they are not endangered.

Verschaffeltia is named after Ambrose Verschaffelt, a Belgian nurseryman and horticulturalist, who lived from 1825 to 1886. *Splendida*, of course, is Latin for splendid, which is the perfect adjective for this gorgeous palm. It is also known as the Seychelles Stilt Palm and as Lattanier Latte.

Verschaffeltia splendida will never be a common palm in South Florida. But if we all take the time to nurse these splendid palms up to large specimens, maybe *Verschaffeltia* can replace those common *Ptychosperma elegans* that are used in all the shopping malls!