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**ASSOCIATED SOCIETIES FOR GROWING AUSTRALIAN PLANTS STUDY  
GROUP NEWSLETTER 73**

**CYCAD, ZAMIAD and PALM STUDY GROUP - DECEMBER 1996 - JANUARY 1997**

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Hi, members - a very happy new year to you all!!

This newsletter comes to you by the generosity of two members only who answered my plea: Mr Don Lawie of Babinda and Mr Don Stallard of Townsville.

As you will read in the Queensland Region Bulletin, we are advertising for a new leader. Ill health and very little member participation have made this so. I will, however, still contribute and help whoever takes over.

Len Butt.

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Hydriastele wendlandiana (F. Muell)

*in Odd's Ends*

There seems to be no common name for this palm, possibly because it is not well known, and occurs only in fairly small areas in the tropics of Queensland and the Northern Territory. I have been told that it was at one stage confused with *Ptychosperma macarthurii*, which grows naturally in a somewhat similar geographic area. As a result, *Hydriastele wendlandiana* was for many years known in the United States as *Ptychosperma macarthurii*.

The natural growth area for *Hydriastele wendlandiana* is in swampy or frequently inundated areas beside creeks and rivers. The genus name alludes to this, since, according to J.A. Baines, the name is derived from the Greek words meaning water and a column. The species name is in honour of the botanist Hermann Wendland, who, with Drude, first described the plant.

About 15 years ago I bought a potted *Hydriastele* from a nursery in the Mission Beach area and was told that it was a "Black Palm". Back then, Alexandras and "Fan Palms" were about all that I could identify, and for both the nursery man and myself to class a *Hydriastele* as a "black" indicated the depth of ignorance of which we were both guilty.

Nevertheless, I fortunately planted it in just the right place - beside a wet season creek in my back yard, in light shade from young rainforest regrowth. It sat still for a few years, and then grew only very slowly, but eventually got going and is presently a very handsome mature palm with many brightly coloured fruit. In the meantime, I found that it was quite plentiful in my area, though I still believed it to be a "Black Palm". The penny finally dropped when I became more interested in, and thus was more knowledgeable about, palms in general, and bought some reference books. This experience demonstrates the perils of relying on hearsay use of common names to depict a particular plant simply because it is too difficult to learn the 'hard' name.

I suspect that some people think that I am bungling it on when I prefer to use botanical names instead of common ones, but then we all have friends or acquaintances with unusual names. We readily learn to use these, so why continue with baby names for our own Aussie plants?

The *Hydriastele* is a very attractive palm. There is just the one species native to Australia. It is a multi-trunked feather palm, and almost always one trunk is dominant, with a second one about half its length, and the remaining two to five quite short. Trunks are tall and thin - up to 25 metres high, but no more than 10cm in diameter, usually much less. The flowers are borne in short spreading clusters high on the main trunk, and are very pretty, fluffy white to cream in colour. The fruit is a distinctive flattened-roundish shape, red to dark orange in colour.

I was told by an enthusiast that fruit picked from a tree will not germinate since they need the action of dropping from a height to initiate germination. He said that he placed a sheet of iron beneath a chosen tree, and the fall of the fruit combined with the sharp impact guaranteed germination would occur, always exactly 365 days - just one year - from the date of falling. Whether or not this is correct I've never troubled to find out, since there are always plenty of seedlings beneath a mature tree. These young seedlings transplant to a pot readily if they are dug carefully.

Potted in a standard potting mix, and given regular water and fertilizer, they grow slowly and irregularly. I have found that most seedlings are ready to be planted out in about a year from the time of collection. If larger seedlings are dug from beneath a parent tree, they do not prosper, in my experience, but sit and sulk for several years before putting on any growth. Thus, it is better to take tiny seedlings and leave established plants alone. In my area, *Hydriasteles* grow along the Russell River, south of Cairns, and in swampy or wet weather inundated areas adjacent to the Russell and Mulgrave Rivers and their tributary creeks.

The riverbank palms co-exist with the many *Alexandra* palms, and like them, they tend to grow very tall and thin. The banks are densely crowded with vegetation, so the palm trunks grow almost horizontally out over the water. Then, when they have reached the light, they become upright and display a small crown of leaves. The growth requirements of *Hydriasteles* - water, heat, shaded roots, but sunshine on the leaves - would make them difficult to grow outside the tropics, but in warmer climates they are very attractive. They'd be a good nursery line, but are rarely seen. Perhaps the long lead time from seed to commercial plant may be prohibitive to nursery profitability.

Don Lawie  
Babinda North Qld

Cycas Data Sheet

1. Identification. CYCAS ARMSTRONGII
2. Habitat. 100 kms E from Darwin, Arnhem Highway, (Mt Bunker) 131° 35' E  
12° 52' S  
Hilly, Granite boulders, dark grey sandy soil (humus), Tropical,  
1800 mm p.d., Eucalypts, Planchonia, spear grass.
3. Trunk. Ht. Ave: 1.5M Dia. Ave: 85 mm PLB. No Branching. 80% single  
MAX: 3.1M + MAX: 120mm 18% double  
2% more than  
 Suckering yes (several plants with single suckers on trunk.)
4. Female Cone. Sp./crown nil. Ovules/sp. nil - ave, nil max. nil  
 Ht. of sp. nil. Seed Color dark green; mottles of yellow orig. nil ripe. out of season for seed - only one plant with three seeds
5. Male Cone. Ht. nil Dia. nil (1/4), nil (1/2) nil (3/4).  
 Peduncle ht. nil Dia. nil, Spor. rows nil horizontal  
nil vertical.
6. Leaves. No./flush Ave 40 max 55 Length leaf Ave 750 Max 830 rachis Ave 710mm Max 820mm  
 Spines 0 to 40 No. per in. 0 to 8. Spines located none within 20mm of leaf base  
along petiole in pairs or alternate
7. Leaflets. Pairs/leaf Ave 106 mm Length at top Ave 60mm middle Ave 130 mm  
MAX 113 mm Max 85 mm Max 150 mm  
 bottom Ave 90mm Decurrent Only in top 1/3. Midrib Above & below prominent  
Max 110 mm few entire leaf
- Color/luster Above: olive green - satin surface - mottled with yellow  
Below: lighter green - matt surface - mottled (ave. 5mm wide & smooth)
8. Other.
- Generally distribution isolated to Granite outcrop 4kms x 2kms
  - Most easterly location of known distribution
  - Change of season, deciduous plant, presently losing leaves, some plants completely barren, others full green, most mottled & brown leaf colour.
  - Cone / seed finished, new growth not present, some sign of sporophylls & seed remain No. tomentum
  - Leaves arched back with small twist near end.

Contributed by DON STALLARD

Information gathered 22 April 1989.