**The SFPS will be electing new board members on December 2, 2013. If you are interested in being on the board of directors, please submit your name with your RSVP, and your name will be placed on a ballot at the party.**

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**Special thanks to Tim McKernan and Bob Lounsberry for providing their incredible gardens for the membership to tour. And another big THANKS to those who came out to support the SFPS! 😊**
GROWING BALAKA PALMS IN SOUTH FLORIDA

Balaka palms are one of the most unusual palm genus in cultivation. They consist of seven species that all possess very thin trunks and crownshafts. Most of the species can grow to 20 to 30 feet in height and are found in the understory of the forest. They look similar to miniature Ptychosperma palms and would be a beautiful addition to any small palm garden in climate zones 10b and 11. They originate in Samoa and the Fiji Islands. They are unusual (and rare) in cultivation because they demand perfect conditions for growth and survival. In other words, they are “high-maintenance” palms that require extensive research before planting. I took it upon myself to study the species and make an attempt to grow a Balaka palm in my garden. It seemed a formidable challenge. After growing 137 different species of palms in the last ten years, I felt I was ready for a serious test.

I first purchased a Balaka seemannii from Redland Nursery in 2008. I was told by Ellis Brown, an employee at Redland, that these palms were extremely temperamental and that their survival rate was low. This was just the motivation I needed. Anyone can stick an Adonidia merrillii in the ground and grow it. I wanted to take on the added incentive of not only growing a Balaka but maintaining it for years to come.

Because Balaka seemannii was the only available species in the genus, I had no other choice. B. seemannii, I was told, was the most “popular” of the Balakas if you could find any at all. So I purchased my B. seemannii and took it home. It was about three feet tall and had a sparse crown of three beautiful leaves. I researched the palm through every available book and website and decided to position it in my front garden where it would receive daily morning moisture and only morning sunlight. I placed a rich, moist soil a few inches around the base of the palm in an attempt to give it the best chance for root development. Then I waited for results. After about one month, I began to notice slight yellowing of the leaves and obvious wind damage (even though I placed it near the front wall of my house). Several leaves were actually ripped from the rachis and a new leaf, which I measured at three inches after purchase, began to lose color. Even with regular morning watering, it looked as though it had been neglected. After another month, it was near death. I couldn’t understand what I had done wrong. My first Balaka palm was gone and I realized Ellis wasn’t kidding when I bought it. STRIKE 1.

After researching Balakas even more, I decided to give them another shot. But I had to determine what mistakes I made with the first one. I knew it was critical to re-create the conditions of the greenhouse at Redland. Had I given it too much sun? Is morning sun the
same as 30% screen-filtered light? Is chlorinated tap water so much different than well water for palms? Should I have placed “outside” soil around the base of the palm? Was the area well-draining? These questions had to be answered before a second attempt at growing a Balaka was made. I knew one thing for sure: I was not placing the palm in an aspect where wind could affect it.

During the fall of 2009, I purchased my second Balaka seemannii, also from Redland. It looked identical to the first one: healthy, well-nourished, and impressive. I decided to plant it in the back yard under a Dictyosperma album and up against a wooden fence. The D. album provided more filtered light than the front garden and the area received very minimal morning light. I continued the pattern of daily morning waterings and chose not to place new invasive soil around its base. Standing water never occurred in this area because the ground is at its highest in this corner of the yard. I thought I had considered every possible condition and made sure I had addressed every detail that I had encountered through my research. Then I waited for results. I was about to experience something I had never dreamed of. Beginning January 1 and ending January 13, 2010, the temperatures hovered between 35 and 45 degrees. The winds made it seem as though it was in the 20’s! I found myself wrapping old blankets around my Cyrtostachys rendas and Areca vestiarias for protection. I bought portable heaters for the interior of my house. I had lived in New Jersey for 28 years and dealt with frigid conditions but never expected to see them in Miami. Needless to say, I lost seven palms, including the C. renda, A. vestiaria, and the B. seemannii, which was dead even before the freeze ended. The extreme cold was simply too much for them. My second Balaka palm was gone because of a factor I had never considered: Incredibly cold temperatures in South Florida. I was disappointed but not defeated. STRIKE 2.

After spending over a year and a half watching more than 130 rare and exotic palms mature in my gardens, I kept thinking about the B. seemannii. It was eating at me: Why is it so hard to grow them? If they grow in the greenhouse, why can’t I grow them in my yard? If the research shows Balaka palms grow in zones 10b and 11, they should certainly survive in Miami. I decided to give it another shot. After all, what are the chances of another 13-day freeze?

During the summer of 2012, I made a return visit to Redland and purchased my third B. seemannii. It looked just like the first two. However, I decided to plant it in the far southwest corner of the yard against two wooden fences. Otherwise, I created similar conditions to the second planting with one exception: I collected rainfall and watered it less often to minimize the possibility of root rot (even though the ground appeared to be well-draining). I even added a drop of Superthrive periodically to promote root growth. It had an aspect of partial shade under numerous larger trees, it was protected from strong winds by the fencing, it existed through times of warm weather, and was planted in rich soil. It was surrounded by an assembly of Licuala, Chamaedorea, Areca, Arenga, and Dypsis palms that
were growing magnificently. I felt I had created the perfect environment for my Balaka palm. Then I waited for results. After about two months, I noticed the leaf tips beginning to turn brown. The oldest leaf weakened and drooped downward even though its color was still dark green. The new leaf spear turned brown and its fate was sealed. My third Balaka was gone. STRIKE 3.

At some time in the future, I might make a fourth attempt at successfully growing Balaka palms but the results and conclusions appear clear: They require extremely high maintenance and perfect conditions. Even so, the chances of survival appear minimal. The research and experts in the field point to the same assumptions. They resist cultivation, at least in South Florida.

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South Florida Palm Society
July 1, 2013
My first experience with Heterospathe was about four years ago when a mysterious palm volunteered in my father's backyard. This palm always seemed to open up a new copper colored leaf and was different from all the other palms in his yard. After quite a bit of searching online, I identified it as Heterospathe elata. Once I found out the name of it, I began to see this palm more and more. I would not say it is a common palm, but Heterospathe elata can be found around South Florida, if you look. Consequently, almost every other member in the genus is completely absent from the South Florida landscape! This fact bothered me, especially since almost every single Heterospathe elata I came on was either very tall, very healthy, or both.

With around 40 members in the genus, why was there only one species being represented locally? This question drove me to do more research which produced a few nurseries that actually carried other species of this very intriguing genus. In my research I also found general information about this group of pinnate palms: Heterospathe elata is actually the largest species in the genus, often reaching 50 plus feet. Most species are about half that size and some are much smaller still. A couple species are known to be acaulescent. No species exhibits a true crownshaft and most palms are solitary in nature with a couple species being known for their clumping trait. All of the information I could gather just lead me closer to purchasing some of these obscure species I had found in various rare palm nurseries.

My first buys were Heterospathe barfodii (but at the time I bought it, it was known as glauca) and Heterospathe longipes. I currently have both palms in bright shade and very rich soil where they get watered everyday. Neither species are fast palms, at least not yet, and the new emergent leaf is slightly more reddish than elata but still a coppery color for barfodii; the adult photos I have seen keep me excited for this palm's future as they depict an absolute stunner! Distinguishing characteristics of this
palm are a very white pseudo-crownshaft, dark green leaves and a new reddish leaf that is much more vibrant than the more common elata. Overall height of this palm should be around 30 feet. Heterospathe longipes (previously known as Alsmithia) is a beautiful palm from Fiji where it is endangered by habitat loss. This palm has a gorgeous pink new leaf and overall cultivation has been very simple. My only drawback from this species has been its willingness to fall over in moderate wind. I currently have a few rocks at the base of the palm to persuade it to stand up straight. Hopefully it will develop more impressive anchor roots in the future, as this has been longipes' only drawback.

After moderate success with these first obscure Heterospathe, I was pretty much hooked and on the hunt for my next species. I soon ended up with what I was told were two more species of Heterospathe—delicatula and scitula, both still seedlings. Again, I was told these palms were alleged to be small understory palms so I planted them accordingly.

Both grew incredibly well and in fact, the delicatula became another scitula (just one of the unfortunate realities of buying rare palms at a small size). Both of my Heterospathe scitula have already begun to cluster and I was thrilled to notice that the new leaves open a purplish-red! These two palms are planted right next to each other and have survived erosion, lack of water and winter sun, for the most part—both look great and are trouble-free! With new confidence and added skepticism, I was ready for my fourth species (the loss of a species due to being sold the wrong palm felt personal, but it wasn’t—I will get to that later)! I came up on Heterospathe intermedia. After asking the nursery questions about what to expect and getting no good answers, I took a chance and brought it home. This palm I would say is the most similar Heterospathe I have to elata, but it is ‘intermediate’ between it and the smaller species—the books say about 25 feet; half of elata, hence the name I gathered… Aside from it being a good grower, just like the rest, it has the most interesting new leaf—it unfurls black! Yes, it opens a new black leaf. I
would not have imagined this except that I saw it happen and it does so about every other month.

Two more species I have been able to find and try for myself are Heterospathe negrosensis and woodfordiana. Both of these palms I acquired as seedlings. The woodfordiana is definitely the hardest Heterospathe I have tried to grow; of the 10 seedlings I purchased, six have died and the remaining four are not so great looking... I suspect this species may be a high elevation palm--These palms tend to languish in our incessant heat, if they make it at all! Heterospathe negrosensis is a much better story. A relatively small species, This palm from the Philippines can easily be placed in the landscape. I have one in the ground that is growing as well as the other species in my garden and the other three negrosensis in my nursery are looking flawless too. The new leaf is a bright orange for now, but my palms are still quite small, and quite often palms tend to morphologically change as they reach adulthood--I expect it to do so, but culture seems easy and I doubt that will change.

So back to that nursery that sold me a mislabeled palm--I later spoke with them politely about the situation and they were happy to GIVE me the palm I was missing--Heterospathe delicatula. I was very gracious to work with such an understanding palm nursery. I have since planted this new palm under the shade a Copernicia berteroana and it is proving to be another trouble-free species of Heterospathe.

So what have I learned so far about this poorly represented genus? One is that its species are fairly easy palms to grow. Secondly, there are quite a few species available, locally that should be tried by SFPS members and anyone else who loves plants. Another thing to remember is placement; full sun is not recommended for small palms--let these palms grow into the sun, for the most part. The naturally diminutive species should be placed in intimate positions where their color will not be lost. Mulching as well as amending the soil with organically rich material is beneficial combined with good watering practices--this should insure the establishment of the palm. Lastly, I have come to learn firsthand how colorful and rewarding these palms really can be for the South Florida gardener. What still remains a mystery to me is why these palms are so rare in local cultivation!

Andrew Street
Free seeds will be available at the membership table.
All current 2013 SFPS members will eat for free.
Spouses will be charged $10.00.
Children under 12 will eat for free.

Lifetime members and spouses are free.

Monday, December 2
Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden
7:00 p.m.