Ravenala madagascariensis

P. Sonnerat

Traveler's-Palm

(Heliconia ravenala, Urania madagascariensis, Urania ravenalia, Urania speciosa)

- Also known as Traveler's Palm Tree, Traveller's Palm, Traveler's-Tree or Palma De Viajero, *R. madagascariensis* is a member of the Strelitziaceae originating from Madagascar, hence the origin of the specific epithet; the genus name is derived from the native Malagasy word ravinala which translates as forest leaves; traveler's versus traveller's in some common names is of English derivation; the name Traveler's-Palm arises from the purported use of the water collected in the concave base of the petioles by thirsty travelers.

- Traveler's-Palm is typically grown as a single trunked evergreen tree with a most unusual habit; the large paddle-shaped leaves resembling those of a *Musa* are on long stout petioles and arranged parallel to each other in a single sweeping horizontal arch creating the overall outline of a giant oriental fan; trees can heights of about 40’ with the trunks and leaves extending to 10’ to 12’ above this; this bold formal shape is the main reason the tree is planted; as plants age suckers may occur from the base and form a clump; the tree is sometimes propagated clonally from these suckers.

- Trees are intolerant of freezing temperatures, being fully hardy only in USDA hardiness zones 10 - 13, although they are sometimes grown in very protected locations in warmer portions of zone 9b or in seasonal large containers; Traveler's-Palm can be grown in most sunny sites with good drainage; a variety of soil types, but require fairly regular amounts of moisture.

- Flowers are borne on stout tightly packed two-sided spiky robust versions of flowers resembling those of *Strelitzia* with a large boat-shaped spiky acuminate green bract enclosing white flowers within; bracts alternate up the central axis; the inflorescences are very noticeable if not particularly attractive; flowers are reported to be pollinated by ruffed lemurs in their native habitat; fruit are large stout pedestrian-brown capsules, but contain black seeds with incredibly bright azure blue arils inside the bract; unfortunately fruit are seldom seen in our region, probably due to lack of suitable pollinators.

- While certainly a striking specimen and botanically exotic plant, *R. madagascariensis* possesses such a bizarre and unconventional habit that it is difficult to work cohesively in most landscape designs; it might make an interesting allée or street tree if the leaves are oriented in a plain that would not hinder traffic; in any case a definite conversation piece; mosquito larvae may reside in the captured water of leaf axis.

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