

**GROWING
FEATURED THIS MONTH: *Normanbya normanbyi*
IN PALM BEACH COUNTY**

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Normanbya normanbyi is a solitary, medium sized, pinnate palm. This monoecious palm can reach an ultimate height of 60 feet. The fronds are plumose and resemble the larger and much more common Foxtail Palm, *Wodyetia bifurcata*. Its common name is the Black Palm. Although the stem is gray in color, the internal color of the stem is black. The wood is very hard and the Aborigines traditionally used this wood for making spears.

Normanbya is a monotypic genus with a single species. It's native to northeastern Queensland, Australia which is located well within the tropics at a latitude of approximately 16 degrees south. It grows in wet rainforest and often in swampy areas near watercourses. As many rainforest palms do, this palm usually germinates in the shade and then it eventually grows into much sunnier exposure. This palm's conservation status is considered vulnerable.

Fronds can range from 8 to 12 feet long. The leaf tops are dark green and the lower surface is silver. This palm has a light green to silver-green crownshaft. Petioles are very short. The leaflets are grouped and whorled. The leaflets are wedge shaped unlike the narrow parallel sided *Wodyetia bifurcata* leaflets. Mature seeds can be pink, red or a brownish purple.

Considering this palm's tropical origin, you would expect it to be cold sensitive. Surprisingly a specimen planted in 1966 at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden (FTBG) survived two nights of 27 degree temperatures during the 1989 Christmas freeze. Fairchild's specimen showed no cold damage due to the record cold temperatures. We have five *N. normanbyi* planted in our garden. All five of our palms showed no cold damage after the record cold winters of 2009 and 2010. Reference books state that *N. normanbyi* is more cold sensitive than *W. bifurcata*, but I haven't noticed any difference in cold hardiness in our garden. Reference books also state that these palms prefer slightly acidic soil, but palms at FTBG in alkaline soil look fine.

If you like the look of a plumose palm you'll need to choose between *N. normanbyi* and *W. bifurcata*. The reasons to plant *N. normanbyi* are the following: shorter fronds, showier wedge shaped leaflets, silver leaflet undersides, slower growing, and less weedy seedling offspring. The negative aspects of *N. normanbyi* are they are less tolerant to full sun exposure at an early age and they do require moist soil. Normal twice a week irrigation should be adequate.

The five *N. normanbyi* in our garden are 21 years old. The stems range from 15 to 21 feet tall measured to the bottom of the petioles. At waist height stems measure 6 ½ inches in diameter. Fronds measure 12 feet long. By comparison, similar age, *W. bifurcata* measure 25 feet tall with 14 foot long fronds and 10 ½ inch diameter stems. Both *N. normanbyi* and *W. bifurcata* have not developed any minor nutritional deficiencies when fertilized at the recommended rates. Without irrigation and proper fertilization, I've seen a lot of deficient *W. bifurcata* growing in public areas in Palm Beach County.

N. normanbyi are available from local palm nurseries. Viable local seed is available, so if there is a demand for this palm it can be readily propagated.



Normanbya normanbyi
in the Beck garden



Normanbya normanbyi
in the Beck garden



Normanbya normanbyi
Growing in Queensland Australia



Wodyetia bifurcata above
Normanbya normanbyi below
Leaf underside and petiole comparison



Wodyetia bifurcata above
Normanbya normanbyi below
Frond length comparison



Wodyetia bifurcata above
Normanbya normanbyi below
Leaflet comparison