

9/26/2004 A Traveler's Friend in the Tropical Dome - TROPICAL DOME

A large and unusually shaped plant in the Tropical Dome is the "traveler's tree," sometimes called the traveler's palm. Even though it develops a palm-like trunk as it ages, it is not actually a palm. It is a relative of banana and bird-of-paradise. The banana-like leaves extend out of the trunk of the tree like the slats of a large fan. The leaves can be up to 10 feet long and 10-20 inches wide. Eventually, the tree can grow from 30 to 60 feet high. The scientific name of the traveler's tree is *Ravenala madagascariensis* named for its origin in Madagascar. It is the only species in its genus, *Revenala*. This beautiful tree is now planted in many tropical and subtropical areas such as Florida. Things to look for on this tree are the distinctive trunk rings and its flowers that are very similar to those of the bird-of-paradise plant. It can bloom at any time and produces creamy white flowers on a flower stalk up to a foot long. The hard fruits contain light blue seeds that are said to be edible. Like banana plants, the traveler's tree can also be propagated from corms or suckers at the base of the plant. The name "traveler's tree" comes from the accumulation of water inside the leaf folds and the hollow leaf bases. Each leaf base can hold up to a quart of liquid- but you would probably have to be pretty thirsty to want to drink this combination of stored rain water and plant sap.