

*Ravenala madagascariensis*

[Synonyms : *Heliconia ravenala*, *Urania ravenala*, *Urania ravenala*]

**TRAVELLER'S PALM** is an evergreen palm-like tree. Native to Madagascar it has a sometimes spikes of greenish-white flowers each surrounded by large boat-shaped, petal-like green leaves (bracts).

It is also known as *Baum der Reisenden* (German), Madagascar traveller's tree, and Traveller's tree.

The fan-shaped arrangement of large banana-like green leaves, often torn to ribbons by the wind, is in 1 dimension.

The flowers are pollinated by birds.

*Madagascariensis* means 'of or from Madagascar'.

Young leaves have been eaten when prepared like cabbage, and the starchy seeds are considered locally as a particularly nutritious food for young children. (The fat in the seed has been extracted and used locally for cooking.) The edible sap is said to be not only nutritious but also rich in sugar.

Rainwater collects in appreciable amounts in the hollow leaf bases and petal-like leaves (bracts) around the flowers. Thus it has provided a ready emergency source of water for the traveller. When the hollow stems are pierced as much as 2 pints of water can flow out – however it is pointed out that the liquid is likely to have an unpleasant vegetable taste and may have various creatures such as tadpoles swimming around in it. (This unexpected water source may well be one explanation for the common name Traveller's palm. Certainly it would seem more feasible than other suggestions such as the shade it can offer as one suspects that most of the time this could be severely limited in view of the one dimensional arrangement of leaves.)

Locally the trunks have been used for building houses and the leaves have provided thatching material. The fibrous stalks have been used to make paper.

Some people have contended that traveller's palm aligns itself in a north-south direction but most authorities point out that on any occasion when this is 'proved' there are likely to be many other examples contradicting the suggestion.

Traveller's palm is said to be particularly fire resistant in that it will rapidly grow back after a fire has swept through its area in contrast to surrounding vegetation.