

# Emergence of the foxtail palm

When a plant grows naturally only in a national park and has wide appeal as an ornamental, you have a problem. How do you stop poachers raiding the park for seed that, because of the demand for the plant, can be sold at a nice profit?

One such plant is the foxtail palm, *Wodyetia bifurcata*. As well as coming from just one area, the Melville Range in Melville National Park, north of Cooktown, Qld, it has the distinction of being the only known species of its genus.

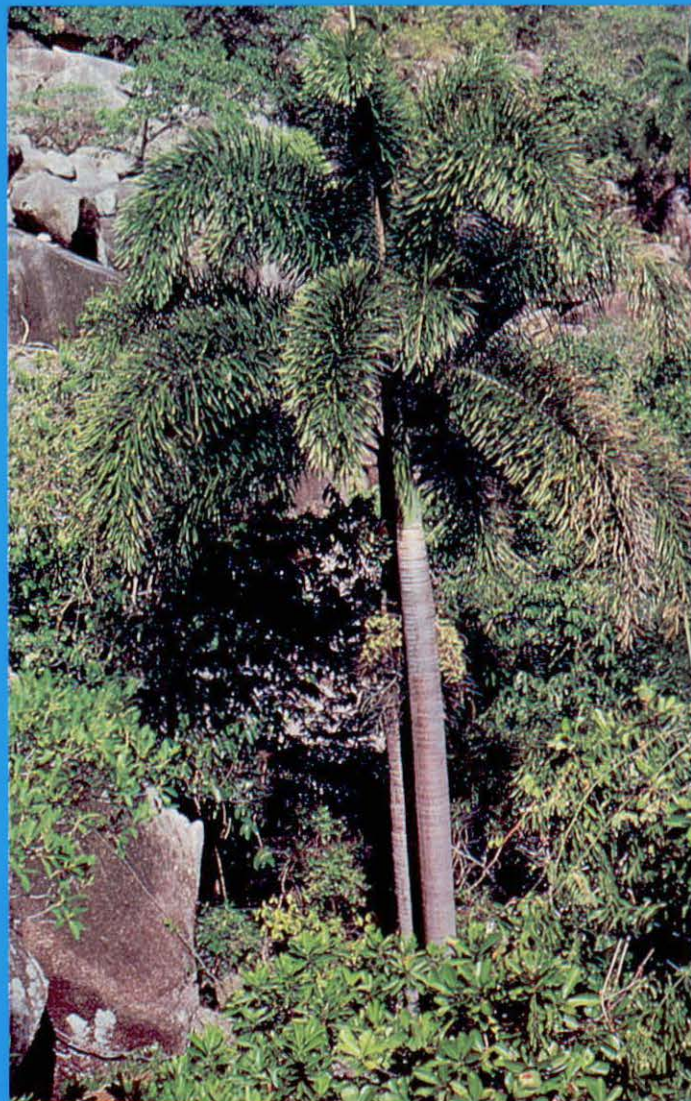
Foxtail was unknown to European botany until 1968 when two foresters, Mr Peter Stanton and Mr Bernie Hyland, noticed it during a survey of the Melville Range. Seven years later Mr Hyland, now with the CSIRO Division of Wildlife and Ecology at Atherton, made the first botanical collection.

Then in 1982 CSIRO's Mr Tony Irvine collected further specimens and taxonomically described the plant. He named it after Wodyeti, the last surviving male Aborigine with traditional knowledge of the area, who died in 1978.

Foxtail is a hardy and distinctive palm. It has large bushy fronds that divide into clusters of long parallel 'fingers', and it grows to heights of up to 15 metres.

Despite the inaccessibility of their home range and prosecutions for illegal possession of seed, foxtail palms are now growing in increasing numbers in towns and resorts in northern Queensland and beyond. Specimens have even found their way into a rainforest display — featuring an assortment of real and plastic plants — in the foyer of a tourist hotel in Cairns.

Recently Mr Irvine returned to the Melville Range to assess the damage done by poachers. He found clear signs that



Foxtail palms grow among granite boulders on northern Queensland's Melville Range.



Red foxtail fruit, and what's inside. Palms grown from seed take 8–12 years to start producing their own seed.

they had been at work. Fortunately, however, they appeared to have collected seed only at the edge of the area occupied by the palms.

The trees grow among large granite boulders on the hillsides. Climb a boulder and the seed is easy to collect from a palm growing beside it; hence poachers have been able to achieve their goal without causing a great deal of damage to the plants.

On his 1982 visit to the area, Mr Irvine collected seed for dispatch to herbaria around Australia and overseas. Also, as he expected foxtail palm would appeal to gardeners and landscape architects — and hence to seed poachers — he sent small quantities of seed to a number of horticulturalists. The idea was that the products of that seed, when they matured, would provide a legal and accessible source of further seed and hence remove the incentive for poaching on Melville Range.

Foxtail palms grown from seed take 8–12 years to start producing flowers and fruit. So production of seed from the plants that started their life in 1982 is imminent. A palm grown from seed planted at about the same time at Hopevale mission, near Cooktown, produced its first fruit last year.

Because of the level of interest in the species, it seems that the sooner seed becomes legally available the better — and not only from the point of view of protecting foxtail palm in its native habitat. Interest in planting the palm is coming from overseas as well as from within Australia, and substantial potential for sales, including exports, clearly exists.

The search for *Wodyetia*, the foxtail palm. A. Irvine.

*Principes*, 1983, 27, 152–7. *Wodyetia*, a new Arecoidean genus from Australia. A. Irvine. *Principes*, 1983, 27, 158–67.