

| **LONGFORM** |

## Palm of His Hand

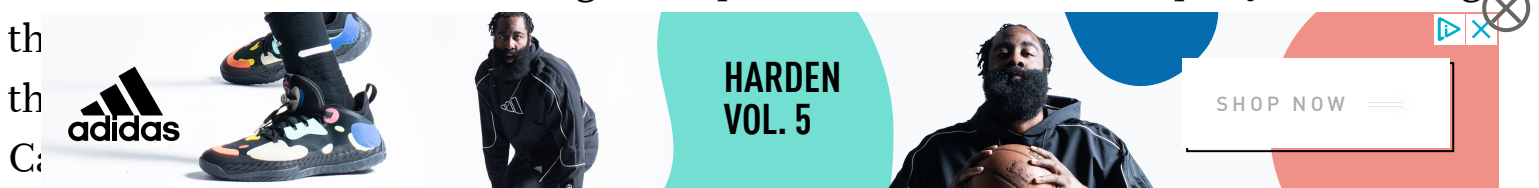
**JOSH SCHONWALD** | **APRIL 6, 2006** | **4:00AM**



He has a *Carpenteria*, an old man, and some pretty nice solitaires, but this is Florida – there's nothing in Scott Zona's South Miami yard to suggest he's a palm-obsessed nut. Moreover Zona, a slightly built, mild-mannered, sideburn-sporting 46-year-old, does not look like the type who would lead weeks-long hikes through malaria-prone forests.

But Zona, whose Fairchild Tropical Garden business card reads simply "Palm Biologist," is in fact the Indiana Jones of the species. There are only about twenty like him in the world: biologists, botanists, and horticulturalists whose mission is to criss-cross the globe, finding and classifying palms. "It's not Club Med botany," he says. "Trust me."

An orchid lover as a kid, the Boynton Beach native became smitten with palms when he received a gift as a teenager. ("A *Drymophloeus litigiousus*," he recalls wistfully.) Zona, who has a Ph.D. in botany (specialty: palms) from the University of Florida, has since the late Eighties spent two or three weeks per year hunting



Melanesia and the Solomon Islands in the western Pacific. He's even journeyed to the Great Palm Frontier – Madagascar, one of the few mysteries left for palm hunters.

Of the more than 2000 known varieties of palms, there are several Zona finds. Two of his faves: the *Carpoxyton macrospermum*, which he found on Vanuatu in 1996, and the *Sabal pumos*, which he turned up in Mexico in the late Eighties. In spite of these contributions to world horticulture, his palm-hunting work, often meticulous and arcane, doesn't typically attract much attention.

But Zona's obscurity was temporarily interrupted last month when it was announced, in the journal *Systematic Botany*, that he and six other scientists had discovered the *Dransfieldia micrantha*. The team of researchers, which included Danish, British, and Indonesian colleagues, claimed that this species, which doesn't yet have a common name, was not just another variety of palm, not a slight tweak to a sabal or a mere variation of a royal. This, they said, was a whole new family. "A new genus. It hasn't happened in at least a decade," Zona says, recalling the Madagascar finds of the Nineties.

All of the excitement began in July 2003 when Zona received a package from the Pacific island of New Guinea. The package included samples – leaves, branches, and dried flowers – that William Baker, a researcher from Britain's Kew Gardens, found in the Wondiwoi Mountains. Zona was puzzled. "The leaves were right for *Heterospathe* [the family of solitaire palms]," recalls Zona, "but the flowers weren't. The flowers looked like a *Ptychosperma micranthum*, but the leaves were wrong." It was a botanical conundrum. There followed almost two years of further analysis by scientists – DNA tests, a visit to a herbarium in Florence – before Zona's inkling was confirmed: "This was something we'd never seen before," he says.

The discovery of a new variety is, of course, cause for celebration in the palm-nut world. But a question remains: Is this *Dransfieldia* family destined for iconic status like the royal, the coconut, the solitaire? Or will it plod quietly into a textbook? The last wave of great discoveries yielded the majestic palm, a commercial success. The areca palm, also a Madagascan, can now be bought at Home Depot. ⊗

Like a good scientist, Zona expressed nil interest in seeing the *Dransfieldia*

*micrantha* show up in the plant and garden section of the megalomaniacal chain. "I'm not finding palms for growing," he says. "It's about understanding the history of palms in New Guinea." But Zona then softens and concedes he enjoyed seeing his *Carpoxyton* being purchased at Fairchild's members show several years ago. The *Dransfieldia*, he says, might have potential: "It's a very ornamental palm, very attractive."

But commercial prognostication isn't Zona's expertise. "Who knows what the nursery man will do," he adds.

One Miami-Dade nursery owner, who already has two *Dransfieldia* in his private collection, is John DeMott of Redland Nursery. The 30-year veteran of the trade says it's too early to predict the new genus's future. "It looks nice. But we need more stock, more germ. Right now, at this volume, it's just art."

In the meantime Zona is working on a book, *Palms of New Guinea*, and plotting another hunt. "There's still a lot of terra incognita there," he says, looking at a map of New Guinea. "On the east coast of the island, the Indonesia side, you have to go there," he says, holding up a piece of *Dransfieldia micrantha*. "You just can't see the palm with this, to see the morphology, to get the palm's true gestalt."

Will there be another big find, a palm that towers over Biscayne Boulevard like the royal? "It's unlikely," Zona says. "It's such a big palm. It would be hard to miss." But then he gestures to a picture of the *Dransfieldia*: "This was totally surprising and unexpected. You just never know what's in that next valley."

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