

Borassus aethiopum

Arecaceae



Indigenous

Am: *Zembaba*

Agn: *Udua*

Eng: *African fan palm, Borassus palm, Deleb palm, Palmirah palm*

Ecology

A palm tree widespread throughout the less dry areas of tropical Africa. It needs a high water table. In Ethiopia, it is found in flood plains and along water courses in Moist and Wet Kolla and Weyna Dega agroclimatic zones in the western parts of Ilubabor and Kefa.

Uses

Timber (roofing, door frames), poles, tool handles, food (fruit, seeds, young seedlings), palm wine (sap of flower shoots), medicine (roots, flowers, oil), fodder (fruit, young leaves), fibre (leaves), baskets, mats (leafstalks, leaves), thatch, oil (fruit, pulp).

Description

The tallest indigenous palm, to 25 m. TRUNK: 80 cm in diameter, smooth grey, thickened above the middle after about 25 years; dead leaves remain on the young trunk. LEAVES: Large fan-shaped, blue-green to 4 x 3 m, deeply divided into leaflets, thorny at the base. FLOWERS: Male and female on different trees, males producing branched spikes to 2 m carrying the pollen. FRUIT: In large bunches weighing 20 kg or more, each fruit round, about 15 cm across, orange-brown in a calyx cup. Inside yellow-white oily edible pulp around 3 seeds each 8 cm, brown, woody.

Propagation

Direct sowing at site, seedlings.

Seed

2–3 seeds per kg. Best to use fresh seed. If they are to be dried, this should be under shade to avoid excessive heat from the sun on one side of the seed. The seed can be sown without removing the pulp surrounding it. Best to germinate seed in a pot instead of a seed-bed. As soon as the ‘root’ starts showing, plant carefully at site. The ‘root’ will carry the embryo down into the ground, perhaps to the water table, then the first leaf will grow up to the soil surface. Germination usually takes about a month.

Treatment: Not necessary.

Storage: Seeds dried in shade remain viable for about 2–3 months.

Management

Growth rate depends on the site, but generally slow growing. Takes about 40 years to reach maturity for flowering; rotation period can be as long as 140 years.

Remarks

Elephants eat the fruit and have contributed to the distribution of the tree. The wood is hard and heavy and resistant to termites and fungi. The trunk and leaf stalks are used to make roof poles.

