

Raphia farinifera

Indigenous

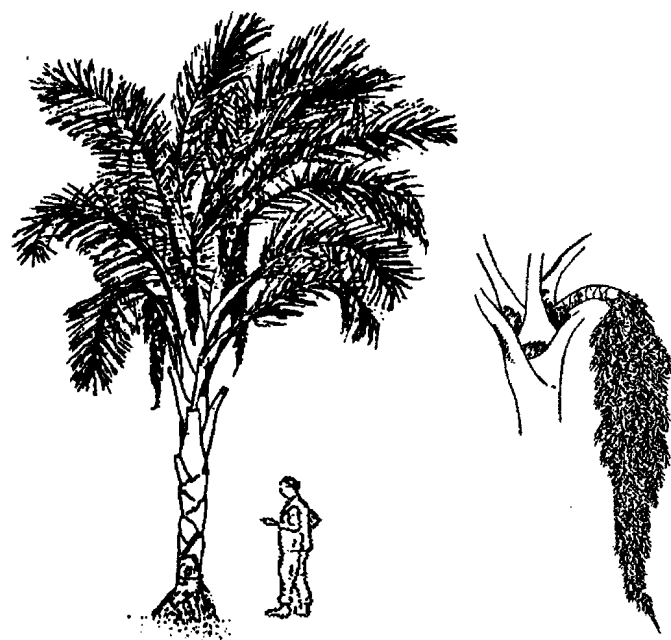
COMMON NAMES: **English:** Raffia palm; **Swahili:** Mwaale; **Taveta:** Mavale, Mwaale; **Tharaka:** Mware.

DESCRIPTION: A massive palm growing in clusters in swamp forest, reaching 25 m but usually much less; the trunk 60 cm or more across and to 10 m high, covered with large leaf bases, old rotting ones, plant debris and epiphytes. **LEAVES:** Pinnate and erect, only slightly spreading, to 8 m long, usually less, the base sheathing the stem. The leaf stalk very strong, orange-brown to crimson when young, cylindrical to 1.5 m long and 20 cm diameter at the base, narrowing to 12 cm across where leaflets arise; 150 or more leaflets grow in 2 planes, each to 1 m long, 8 cm wide, edged with little spines, hardly drooping or rather stiff. Leaflets like an upside-down 'V' in cross-section. **FLOWERS:** Male and female flowers on the same plant, grow in massive hanging heads from the top of the stem, to 3 m x 35 cm. After flowering the plant dies, often the majority in an area dying in the same year. **FRUIT:** Resembling a cone, shiny orange-brown and ovoid, about 10 cm long by 5 cm across, with 12–13 rows of tightly packed convex scales. Inside are an oily layer and one seed about 5 cm long, shaped like the fruit.

ECOLOGY: A palm tree that grows in eastern Africa and throughout southern tropical Africa. It is widespread in riverine forest and freshwater swamp forest and is frequently cultivated. In Kenya, it grows in low-lying wet places and along river banks. Found, for example, at Fourteen Falls on the Athi River near Thika and in the wetter forests of the Lake Victoria belt, up to 1,400 m. Also found on the south coast. Thrives in deep black sandy clay loams. Agroclimatic Zones II–IV.

USES: Furniture (leaf stalks), edible oil (extracted from the fruit), fibre (from leaves for ropes, mats and baskets), thatch (leaves), rafters (leaf midrib), chairs (leaf midrib), ladders (leaf midrib), decoration (fruit).

PROPAGATION: Seedlings (sow seeds in pots) and wildings.



Arecaceae (Palmae)

SEED: The large seed can be collected under old trees.

treatment: Not necessary.

storage: Avoid storage. The seed is very hard.

MANAGEMENT: Grows on raised ground in wet or moist areas.

REMARKS: *Raphia* has some of the biggest leaves of all plants. This species is quickly disappearing as its habitat is being destroyed. There is a need to protect its habitat and control its use to prevent over-exploitation. The outer skin of young leaflets is stripped off and makes excellent fibres for ropes and baskets—the raffia of commerce. The strong midrib is used locally for rafters, chairs and ladders. Leaf stalks are used for furniture and leaves make a good thatch.

FURTHER READING: Beentje, 1994; Dharani, 2002; Katende et al., 1995, 1999; Palgrave and Palgrave, 2002; Ruffo et al., 2002; Storrs, 1979.

