

SO, YOU LIKE BIG TROPICAL PLANTS?

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To live in Southwest Florida is to live in a gigantic garden where it seems all gardening dreams can come true. Do you dream of having a landscape that looks like a jungle? Do you like big tropical plants? I think that I can suggest two plants that will fill this request when planted in the right place. Sometimes misidentified and confused for each other, the Giant Bird-of-Paradise and the Traveler's Palm are large tropical plants that will impress you and the neighbors with beautiful foliage and interesting flowers.

While you may be familiar with the regular 3-4 foot tall Bird-of-Paradise with its beautiful and exotic orange and blue flowers, imagine one on steroids forming huge clumps and growing up to 30 feet tall! This is what you can expect from the **Giant Bird-of-Paradise** or **White Bird-of-Paradise**; also known as *Strelitzia nicolai*. Almost like a banana with a palm-like trunk, the Giant Bird-of-Paradise has grayish-green leaves up to eight feet long. The huge flowers look just like their smaller orange

cousins in form, but are instead white and dark purple-blue in color, and up to 12 inches long. A native of South Africa, the Giant Bird is adapted to our climate and actually holds up well during our colder winter months with even some tolerance to light frosts. Grow this plant in a full sun to part shade area in well-drained soil. If possible, select a spot sheltered from heavy winds that can shred the leaves. The Giant Bird-of-Paradise is an ideal plant to grow near a pool or to accent an entrance. Be careful not to plant them too close to a house as you will be tasked with pruning to keep this giant in line. When fully grown the clump can get up to 18 feet wide. You can actually divide clumps or remove suckers to make new plants. The Giant Bird-of-Paradise is readily available at most garden centers.

Often confused for the Giant Bird-of-Paradise, and vice versa, the **Traveler's Palm** or *Ravenea madagascariensis* is a horticultural beauty. Right

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up front let me tell you that this plant is more cold sensitive than the Giant Bird and accordingly needs a spot that hosts a microclimate or can supply a hardiness zone of at least 10A. While I have seen the Traveler's Palm growing in the warmer areas in Charlotte County nearer the coast, this plant will not do well in cold interior sites. In its prime, the Traveler's Palm is like no other plant. With a huge fan of upright banana-like leaves on top of a palm-like stem, this plant can grow up to 30 feet tall with a foliage spread of 15 feet in width. Each of the huge leaves attaches to the stem with a cup-like base that can in fact catch and store one to two cups of water. This feature has given this plant its famous name, Traveler's Palm, as it has supplied thirsty travelers in its native Madagascar with a drink of rainwater. In addition to the foliage,

a mature plant will produce exotic-looking white flowers held inside 12-inch boat-shaped bracts. Used as a specimen plant in a large container or as a deck or patio planting, the Traveler's Palm is best planted to accent a large tropical landscape. Keep in mind that the Traveler's Palm often outgrows the landscape of a small residence. This plant likes a full sun area in somewhat rich organic, well-drained soil. Young specimens do appreciate some shade, however. Protection from strong winds will help reduce leaf tattering. Remove any suckers that develop at the base of the plant to maintain a single-trunk appearance. Traveler's Palms are sometimes available at local garden centers, but may be more difficult to find in our region.

Both of these massive plants make a tremendous impact in the landscape. Careful attention to climate and mature sizes will help make the Giant Bird-of-Paradise or Traveler's Palm more sustainable in your yard.

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Turner, at 764.4351 or email Allison.Turner@CharlotteFL.com. Allison can help educate you about the FYN Program so you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

**contact a
MASTER GARDENER**
on the Plant Lifeline from 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 764.4340 or by email Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com.

You can also visit them at one of our many **Plant Clinics** around the county:
<http://charlotte.ifas.ufl.edu/PlantClinics.pdf>

Resource:

- Culbert, D.F. (2001) *Traveler Trees and White Birds for Tropical Tastes*. Okeechobee County UF/IFAS Extension Service.
- Gilman, E.F. & Watson, D.G. (2006) *Ravenala madagascariensis: Traveler's Tree*. UF/IFAS Extension Service.
- Gilman, E.F. & Watson, D.G. (2006) *Strelitzia nicolai: White Bird-of-Paradise*. UF/IFAS Extension Service.
- Scheper, J. (1999) *Strelitzia nicolai - Florida*.
- McLendon, C. (2005) *Ravenala madagascariensis - Florida*.

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