

Temperamental Licualas

Licualas are considered to be some of the most ornamental palms—and also the most difficult to grow. Highly desirable are the mottled leaf forms such as *Licuala radula* and *L. mattanensis* ‘Mapu’ (Fig. 1) and the circular leaf forms including *L. cordata* (Fig. 2) and *L. orbicularis*. They are similar in difficulty to many *Iguanura* species. Sometimes termed “ego plants,” they challenge the grower to overcome the many obstacles associated with their horticulture.



1. A beautifully mottled *Licuala mattanensis* that has been grown under perfect circumstances. This is one of the most horticulturally challenging species of *Licuala*.

There are many familiar problems encountered in growing Licualas. Extremely slow or non-existent growth, yellowing, weak root systems and tip-browning are some of the most common disorders. Nevertheless, it is possible to grow these species under carefully managed conditions. Discussed below are some of the horticultural methods that growers are using to produce healthier Licualas.

Container culture may be the best way of successfully growing the more challenging *Licuala* species. Artificial conditions that are highly controlled are often required. Using containers in a greenhouse environment, the grower can attempt to simulate the palm’s natural environment. Only under these highly-supervised

conditions can horticultural adjustments be made quickly in response to changes in the health of the palm.

While many Licualas are found growing in swampy conditions, under cultivation they do not want to be too wet. Therefore, the best container for growing many Licualas is a clay pot. When substituted for plastic pots, clay pots are more permeable which helps avoid overwatering. Because these pots also dry out faster, they also require more frequent watering.

Many species want to be kept drier than many growers would assume. For this reason, the container mixture for greenhouse culture should be very fast



2. The pleated circular leaves of the dainty *Licuala cordata* make it a favorite ornamental palm; however, it is also one of the most difficult palms to grow.

draining. The light mix will also warm up more quickly. Lighten the potting mix by amending with orchid bark or clay pellets. Some liken *Licuala* culture to the conditions and constant care necessary to raise orchids.

One of the most critical requirements is the need for constant warmth (Fig. 3). This includes the necessity of sustained nighttime heat. For example, many *Licuala* species do much better on the Florida Keys than on the slightly cooler Florida mainland. Of course, frost is not tolerated.

Most *Licualas* grow under very humid conditions in their native habitat. For example, the natural environment in Borneo, where many *Licualas* are found, is very humid almost to the point of misting. It is difficult to match this high level of humidity in cultivation. However, under drier cultivated conditions, the leaf tips will burn (Fig. 4). Their need for moist air makes many *Licuala* species very difficult to grow as interiorscape plants because of insufficient humidity.



3. The yellowing of this *Licuala paludosa* may be due to the need for constant warmth, micronutrient deficiency or other factors.

In addition to consistent warmth and humidity, Licualas also demand good air circulation. While most need to be grown under the protected area of a canopy, they should not be surrounded by protection which will restrict air flow. Lack of adequate air movement can lead to leaf spotting from fungus. Of course, safeguards from strong wind are a must. *Licuala* leaves, especially entire leaf forms, will be



4. The tip burn on *Licuala orbicularis* is most likely due to insufficient humidity. Many Licualas require very high humidity.

torn, ripped or shredded by powerful winds. Winds will also have a drying effect that is damaging to most palms, including Licualas.

Many species of *Licuala* are more tolerant of light than is generally assumed. They do not require a deep shade environment. Filtered light is suitable for most species. In tropical climates, where there is more humidity present, some *Licuala* species can even be grown in full sun.

Using an appropriate fertilizer is essential when attempting to grow many of the delicate species of Licualas. A resin-coated balanced fertilizer with slow release duration of 180 days or more appears to be best. Nutricote® from SunGro Horticulture (www.sungro.com) is a product suitable to the requirements of Licualas. It is available in several formulations and release longevities. The resin coating provides a uniform release of nutrients. Some controlled release fertilizers are sensitive to temperature and release too much fertilizer too early. The excess fertilizer not used by the palm builds up as salts in the root zone which will inhibit growth. Some growers also believe that excess fertilization can weaken mottling, causing the yellow mottle to turn green. Slow-release fertilizer is used to fortify the container media. Grower trials have shown that fertilizers like Nutricote can be safely incorporated into the soil mixture without burning even the tenderest Licualas. The relatively high cost of using this advanced fertilizer is offset by its long duration and uniformity of release.

The weak root system exhibited by many *Licuala* species is one cause of the difficulties related to growing this genus. Some species have especially short roots. The use of liquid kelp or kelp meal will be beneficial in helping to promote a stronger root system.

Even under ideal conditions, most Licualas will grow at a slow pace. However, growth should be fairly steady and the rate should increase once the palm is past the seedling stage. Following these horticultural recommendations should improve your odds of growing the most desirable – and temperamental – *Licuala* species. – contributed by Paul Craft, Loxahatchee, Florida; Jeff Marcus, Mt. View, Hawaii and Tri Vuong, Miami, Florida, USA 🌴