

Horticulture Column

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Q. I have a 20-year old *Arenga engleri* in my garden, but it is not setting seeds. While it was still in a pot it did produce seeds, so in the hope that it would produce even more seeds, I put it in the ground. It has since grown profusely but has stopped flowering or setting seeds. Could you advise me as to what to do? Shri Dhar, Calcutta, India.

A. As you probably know already *A. engleri* has a hapaxanthic flowering habit, that is, each individual trunk grows to a stage of maturity and then begins to flower, first at the top of the trunk, and thereafter successively at each node, down the trunk. This process of flowering and producing fruits and seeds takes several years for each trunk, and once it begins, that trunk is unable to produce any new foliage. Existing foliage begins to show wear and tear and may begin to look unsightly. For this reason some growers might prefer that their *A. engleri* do not flower. However the flowers of this palm are very fragrant, and if you wish to produce seeds for propagation, then you will want them to flower. It should be mentioned that in order to set seeds you will probably need to have at least two trunks, or two separate palms, in flower at about the same time, since, on a given inflorescence, the male flowers open, shed their pollen and fall well before the female flowers become receptive. Alternatively one could collect and preserve the pollen and apply it to the female flowers when they are receptive.

Perhaps the stress of being confined in a pot brought on the flowering (prematurely, perhaps) of some of the trunks of your *A. engleri* when it was still relatively young, and now that it has found itself in a more congenial situation in your garden the trunks that have since grown are able to reach their full potential. I am certain that eventually your palm will flower and produce seeds once again as long as it is not in an extremely shady location and the most mature trunks are not being removed for any reason.

Q. My foxtail Palms, *Wodyetia bifurcata*, are dropping their leaves prematurely. What is

troubling me is that the upper portion of the trunk appears to be splitting through several layers at once, rather than the typical loss of one leaf at a time. Is this some kind of deficiency with nutrients? I have been using a time release, encapsulated palm fertilizer along with chelated iron and sulfur, and my soil pH is 7.5–8.0. Before using these materials the palms were yellowish, their color has since improved. It is just the splitting of the upper portion of the trunk that concerns me now. Tony Kaniewski, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

A. The upper portion of the trunk of a foxtail palm is known as a crownshaft, it is formed of the bases of the leaves with the oldest one being visible on the outside. Within this crownshaft is the apical meristem or bud of the palm. This area is where new leaves are formed.

When you corrected the nutrient deficiencies that had caused your palm to have yellow leaves, no doubt the bud, inside the crownshaft, began to grow larger and more vigorously as well. On the outside of the crownshaft are the leafbases that were formed when your foxtail palms were still undernourished; they no longer fit. If you have ever put on a pair of pants that were too tight before sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner then you know the feeling. I do not think you have to worry. The fertilizer that you described is a quality product, and you should continue to use it according to directions. After a transition period, your foxtail palms should resume normal appearance and growth.

The pH of your soil is perhaps a little higher than it should be for foxtail palms, but do not apply any more sulfur to lower it. You should wait at least six months before testing the pH level to determine if more sulfur is needed. Too much sulfur could cause injury to your plants. Likewise, it is probably not necessary to apply chelated iron to your palms, as it is contained, in the correct proportions, in the fertilizer that you are using.