

The Micronesian Ivory Nut

by Bob Benson

In the western Pacific Ocean, on the island of Pohnpei in the Eastern Caroline island chain, grows the ivory nut palm tree. Scientifically named *Metroxylon amicarum*, this palm is indigenous to only this island. Of all the vegetable ivory palm trees in the world, of which there are about a dozen species, this palm produces the largest seed.

This particular palm tree grows in areas where there is a profusion of fresh water. Pohnpei Island receives from 200-400 inches of rain annually. The trees start producing fruit at approximately 12 to 20 years of age.

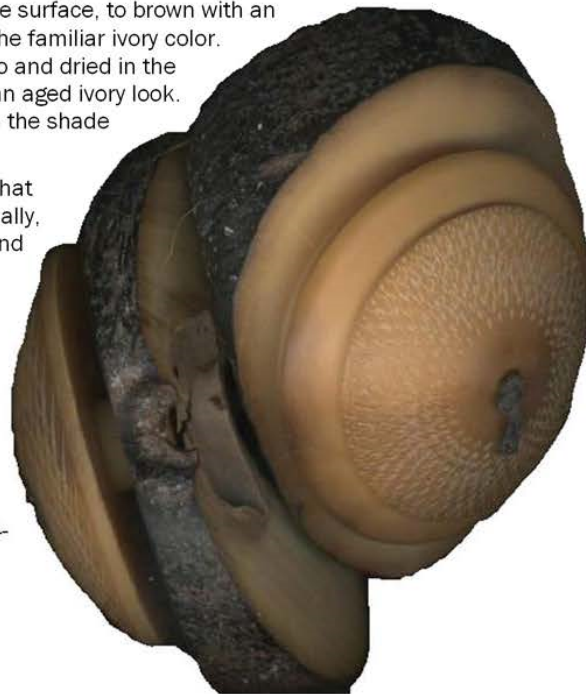
The fruit of the trees are about four to six inches tall and four to five inches in diameter, with small vertical rows of scales that are light to dark brown in color. Inside this outer scaly husk is the nut-like seed. Unlike many of the other vegetable ivory palm seeds, this seed is hard and never softens. On a spot at or near the bottom of the seed is the embryo indentation where the root sprouts.

The seed has a natural bowl shape with some soft cork-like material within this bowl cavity. The seed has a black seed coating that is a very thin outer layer. It can be polished brightly with fine sandpaper. The removal of this layer will expose the interior of the seed.

It appears that the seed drying process determines the color. The color can vary from black on the surface, to brown with an aged ivory, to white and the familiar ivory color. Seeds that are exposed to and dried in the sun become brown with an aged ivory look. All seeds that are dried in the shade keep the white color.

There are other colors that appear as well. Occasionally, some green will appear and it seems that this color results from exposure to air before the nut is completely dried. A certain amount of fungal stain appears and the beginning of rot will create some dark grey shades as well.

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Metroxylon amicarum
Arecaceae
R. L. Stemmermann



Vegetable Ivory trees with fruit, ABOVE.

RIGHT: The vegetable ivory nut.

LEFT: The vegetable ivory nut after it has been husked, cut into thirds, and each side piece has been initially lathe carved.



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