

A Tale of Two (Three?) *Neodypsis*

Text and photographs by

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Introduction

Palm growers in southern California have had the opportunity to grow the distinctive and unusual triangle palm, *Neodypsis decaryi*, in their collections and gardens since the 1960s. Generally, *N. decaryi* performs adequately there, and some collectors have attractive, fruiting plants. In the middle and late 1970s, Mardy Darian of Vista, California, who has done more than anyone to bring palms from Madagascar to the attention of the botanical world and into cultivation (and who was honored for his efforts with *Marojejya darianii*, the spectacular big-leaf), introduced several other *Neodypsis* spp. from Madagascar. Although most of Darian's introductions have remained quite rare and are in the hands of only a few collectors, two species, one purported to be *N. lastelliana* (Fig. 1) and the other a closely related but unnamed plant commonly referred to as *N. "Darianii"*, gained wider distribution since a few nurseries grew them commercially for a short time.

Both are striking and handsome palms characterized by attractively ringed stems topped by large crowns of graceful pinnate leaves whose leaf sheaths are densely covered with thick, showy, reddish or brownish, woolly tomentum. Growers have long

recognized some of the differences between the unnamed species and the plants purported to be *N. lastelliana*, especially those evident at a young age, such as the presence or absence of the "heel" at the base of the stem and of the white lines on the lower surface of the rachis. One of the differences that stood



Fig. 1. Marianne Hodel in the Spies' garden in Tahiti stands next to plant purported to be *Neodypsis lastelliana*. It has a more robust, white trunk flared dramatically at the base and with wide rings. Note the lack of a petiole.

out most to growers was in the hardiness and vigor of the plants in coastal southern California. Plants of the unnamed species withstood lower temperatures and grew more vigorously than those of *N. lastelliana*. Darian (pers. comm.) attributes the differences in hardiness and vigor to the fact that the unnamed *Neodypsis* inhabits harsher, drier areas further south in Madagascar which are subject to greater extremes of temperature. Conversely, *N. lastelliana* occurs in more tropical moist and wet forests in the northern part of Madagascar where climatic conditions are not as harsh.

Two (or Three?) Species

The recent flowering and fruiting in Tahiti, French Polynesia of a cultivated specimen of the unnamed species of *Neodypsis* (its first record in cultivation) has provided excellent material for study. Comparison with the type specimen of *N. lastelliana* from Paris and the cultivated tree purported to be *N. lastelliana* shows the material from the unnamed plant referred to as *N. "Darianii"* to be a new species.

However, it is unfortunate that the plant in Tahiti purported to be *N. lastelliana* has not yet flowered since it would be interesting to compare its flowers with those of the type specimen of *N. lastelliana* in Paris for positive confirmation. Until then, we cannot be absolutely confident that the plant purported to be *N. lastelliana* in cultivation is really that and not some other *Neodypsis*. This uncertainty raises the possibility that a third species could be involved.

The New Species

Since the unnamed species referred to as *N. "Darianii"* is not uncommon in collections and gardens in California or elsewhere, it seems appropriate to name and describe it formally here. The following name is proposed here for this new species of *Neodypsis*.

Neodypsis leptocheilos D. R. Hodel,
sp. nov. Figs. 2-6.

Neodypsis lastellianae Baillon
*affinis sed bractea basili foveum
triflorum parva tenui acuta erecta non
rugosa differt.* *Typus:* CULTIVATED.
French Polynesia: Tahiti, Papeari, P.K.
49.8, residence of Christina Spies, 8
April 1992, *Hodel 1144* (*Holotypus* BH;
Isotypus K).

The preceding paragraph validates the name of the new species of *Neodypsis* according to the rules of botanical nomenclature by providing a Latin diagnosis and designating a type. The Latin diagnosis simply says that the new species is similar to *Neodypsis lastelliana* but differs in the small, thin, sharp, erect, unwrinkled bract at the base of each floral pit. The type is that element, in this case a dried specimen consisting of leaves, flowers, and fruits collected in Tahiti, upon which the new species is based. The original specimen, or holotype, is in the herbarium of the Bailey Hortorium at Cornell University, New York, and a duplicate specimen, or isotype, is in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, England.

The epithet is derived from the Greek *lepto*, meaning thin, and *cheilos*, meaning lip, and is used here in reference to the thin liplike bract at the base of the pit containing the flower cluster.