

# The Mystery Palm of Salem: can you name it?

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SALEM - Melody Ferguson has no idea what the proper Latin name of her beloved "weeping palm" is but after 28 years in her keeping, she frequently refers to it as "Mom".

"No one's been able to tell what it is," she says. "And I've never seen another one like it."

A confessed "plant nut", Melody first encountered the plant in Picton.

"I was walking by a home where an 85-year-old woman was cleaning out her garden. I admired the plant, she asked me in for tea, and gave me a bulb. She never knew the proper name of it either."

The plant truly is unique. Every fall, the stem and foliage die off. Melody tucks the potted bulb away in a dark place for the winter months. Then, each spring, out of what looks like only a container of dirt, the palm re-emerges.

"You can almost watch it grow," Bill Ferguson says. "It will grow three to four inches overnight."

The pulpy stem, mottled like a boa constrictor, shoots up and the branches start forming. The leaves have no stems. Instead, they sit, like a quilted applique, on the top of the branch structure. The green foliage has deep-rutted veins from a central artery, but the around the outside of the foliage, like a quilted outline, another vein is formed. Each morning, when the Ferguson's look in at the plant in the front living room window, there are tiny drops of water on the very tips of the leaves, hence their term "weeping palm".

"The plant takes the water back in during the day," says Melody.

Like a multiplying lily, "Mom" has produced many children over the years.

"I have given several smaller shoots away to people in the past, but they've forgotten them in the spring and let them die. I can't have that. Now, I won't give them away because people don't appreciate something that's free. I'll sell them a shoot, though."

Melody waits until each new plant has regrown at least two years to ensure survival before letting it go.

"Some of female and some are males," she says of the offspring, "but I have no way of knowing which is which. The females will go on and produce new plants while the males don't."

The plant blooms once every 20 years, and for good reason.

"It stinks," Melody says of the blossom. "It's a rusty colour and smells like rotten eggs. It's bad. Fortunately, the bloom only lasts 48 hours and then drops off."

It looks like 1999, or even the Millennium, may be marked by the weeping palm, if "Mom" honours her keepers.

"I've had it bloom once for me 19 years ago."

The palm stands four feet high and three to four feet across, resembling an umbrella. Sensitive to sunlight, it is turned every day to ensure it grows erectly.

"It loves the sun, I water it twice a week in this heat, and I love it," Melody says emphatically. "I would never give it up. But, if anyone wants to come and see it, or they want a slip, I'll sell them one. I want people to respect it and not forget they have it."



Melody Ferguson in her Salem home living-room. Her friends regularly contribute to her broach collection.



The weeping palm has unusual foliage: no stems, directly attached to the branch of the palm plant.

Photo by Mandy Martin