

GROWING *Zamia pumila* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Dale Holton

Zamia pumila is one of the more popular Caribbean *Zamia*'s. It is described as being endemic to Hispaniola, although I have encountered plants on the Isle of Pines off of the southwestern coast of Cuba. There also was a locality on the north coast of Cuba just east of Havana where it was supposedly growing. There is a plant just on the north of Camaguey, near the town of Neuvitas, that looks very similar to *Zamia pumila*.



Zamia pumila growing on the
Isle of Pines in Cuba.

(Photo by Dale Holton)

Carl Linnaeus described the genus and species in 1763. The name is derived from *Pumilus*, Latin for dwarf or short. I first saw them in habitat in June 1996 while on a PBPCS tour of the Dominican Republic. They were growing on the beach under coconut palms. They were surrounded by all of the normal garbage that you would expect to find washed ashore. During bad storms, the salt water had to be washing over them. The plants that I saw on the Isle of Pines were growing under the same conditions. I suspect that during hurricanes, seeds get washed out to sea and sometimes end up on other islands. The plants near Neuvitas were growing away from the shore line but very near to the coast.

This *Zamia* is very fast growing and could go from seed to coning size plants in 3-4 years. I have seen them used as landscape plants in commercial areas in Broward County. I have a hedge of them along both sides of my driveway. They thrive on a lack of attention. Mine get watered when it rains. In the late winter, they do have problems with mealy bugs and scale which cause black sooty mold. I usually cut off all of the leaves in April and it usually takes about a month for them to grow new leaves. This also keeps the plants lower, as the next new leaves don't have to fight their way through a tangle of several older growths of leaves to get to the light. These plants will grow equally well in shade or full sun. I have found that they go through the winters here very well. They will produce some seed on their own, but to ensure good seed production I hand pollinate them.

The original inhabitants of Hispaniola, Taino Indians, used the plants for food. According to Whitelock's book, they ground the tubers and made a paste out of them, which they wrapped in leaves, and then let them sit for several days until they turned black and got worms in them. Then they made tortillas out of them, worms and all. You got your protean and starch all in one.



Zamia pumila growing on the isle of Pines in Cuba.
(Photos by Dale Holton)

