

# GROWING *Zamia splendens* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

*Submitted by Charlie Beck*

*Zamia splendens* is a small cycad native to eastern Chiapas, Mexico. It grows in heavy shade at elevations of 2,000 – 4,900'. Rainfall in its native habitat averages 79" annually with most of the precipitation falling in the summer months. It was officially described in 1984 by Dr. Bart Schutzman. The species name *splendens* means shining or brilliant.

*Zamia splendens* does not take up much space in the garden. It typically holds only one or two leaves. Occasionally some plants may produce side shoots and plants then hold many more leaves and are much more impressive. But don't let the low leaf count deter you from adding this gem to your garden. Even plants with two leaves can be very attractive. Most leaves emerge with a red-brown color that really stands out in the garden (some specimen plants have green emergent leaves). The leaflets slowly harden off and turn a glossy green and become quite stiff. I recommend grouping many *Z. splendens* together to increase the visual impact. The stems are subterranean and typically grow 10' long and have a 2' diameter. Obviously this cycad will never outgrow its space in the garden.

In cultivation vigorous plants can have fronds which measure up to 44" long including 20" long armed petioles. Typically plants are not quite as large. Each frond can hold 4-10 pairs of leaflets which measure up to 10" long and 3" wide. Female plants usually grow 1 or 2 cones which are shaped almost round or cylindrical. Male plants grow 2-7 cylindrical cones per crown. Tom Broome, President of the Cycad Society, reported that pollinating more than one cone per plant may be too stressful to the plant. He once hand pollinated 3 female cones on a plant. The energy demands of producing seeds on three cones depleted the plant to such an extent that the parent plant died. Tom recommends removing all but one cone when pollinating this species. Dale Holton echoes this advice.

We planted eight *Z. splendens* in our garden. Plants are 7-17 years old and all have flourished. Plants have survived winter low temperatures and periodic flooding. Two female plants have a cluster of seedlings growing below them. Obviously there is a pollinator in our garden helping out with reproduction. Dale Holton reported that *Z. splendens* readily crosses with *Z. variegata*. If so, the foliage will have the characteristic speckling of *Z. variegata*.

Although not commonly found at nurseries, a limited number of plants are available at Holton Nursery. Dale Holton hand pollinates *Z. splendens* from his collection and usually stocks this cycad. If I were starting a cycad collection, I would start out obtaining several *Z. splendens*. The glossy wide leaflets are really distinctive and the plant flourishes in our sandy soil in Palm Beach County.



*Zamia splendens* with multiple offshoots  
(Photo by Charlie Beck)



*Zamia splendens* seedlings beneath mother plant  
in the Beck garden.  
(Photo by Charlie Beck)



*Zamia splendens* leaf detail  
(Photo by Charlie Beck)



*Zamia splendens* typical sized plant  
(Photo by Charlie Beck)



*Zamia splendens* with new growth growing in Dale  
Holton's garden.  
(Photo by Dale Holton)



*Zamia splendens* female cone  
(Photo by Charlie Beck)