

GROWING *Archontophoenix cunninghamiana* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Archontophoenix cunninghamiana is a solitary, pinnate, medium sized palm. It is a monoecious palm that can grow in sun or shade. *A. cunninghamiana* displays a prominent dark green crownshaft which can be streaked with red or purple. Common names are bangalow or piccabean palm. Bangalow is an Aboriginal term for “water carrying basket.” The crownshaft can be folded into a watertight vessel with the petiole used as a handle. With time, stems can grow 80’ tall but my experience with this palm is that the growth rate slows down considerably after reaching 20’. Stems can grow to 1 foot in diameter. Leaves can measure up to 12’ long and usually do not droop below horizontal. Leaflets grow in a single plane and are sharply pointed. New leaves may emerge with pink or red tones. Inflorescences emerge below the crownshaft and are pendulous and highly branched. Mature fruit color is red and measure 0.4 - 0.6” in diameter.

Archontophoenix cunninghamiana is native to coastal regions of eastern Australia. Its native range is between latitudes 21 and 35 degrees south which includes both tropical and sub-tropical areas. West Palm

Beach’s latitude is 26.7 degrees north which seems a perfect match for growing this palm. *A. cunninghamiana* grows in moist forests sometimes occurring beside or even in creek beds. Its native habitat ranges between sea level and 3000’.

The two most common *Archontophoenix* species grown in Florida are *A. cunninghamiana* and *A. alexandrae*. These palms have a similar appearance. *A. alexandrae* is a palm native to tropical Australia and is not as cold hardy as *A. cunninghamiana*. The most noticeable difference between these palms is that *A. cunninghamiana* has lavender flowers where all other *Archontophoenix* species have white/cream colored flowers. *A. cunninghamiana* also is the only *Archontophoenix* species without silver scales on the bottom side of the leaflets. Another difference is that *A. cunninghamiana* has ramenta (brown scales) on the underside of the leaflet midrib. *A. cunninghamiana* leaflets are more pendulous than *A. alexandrae*. The leaflets tend to roll about its midrib due to lack of secondary ribs. The leaves are self cleaning and they are dry when they drop, so they are light and do not damage underplantings

One of the first palms we planted in our Lantana garden was *A. cunninghamiana*. This was in 1993 in a time where cold hardiness was a prime concern. In 1989 we experienced record cold temperatures. That year we had two nights at 26 degrees in Jupiter. Even Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden had temperatures in the mid to high 20’s. Many cold sensitive palms all throughout Florida were killed outright by that hard freeze. We planted 12 small specimens and they grew 25-30’ tall in 19 years. The leaves measure 12’ long and the stems are 8” in diameter.

The only issues during that time were the three hurricanes we experienced in 2004 and 2005. Four of the



19 year old
Archontophoenix cunninghamiana
in the Beck garden.



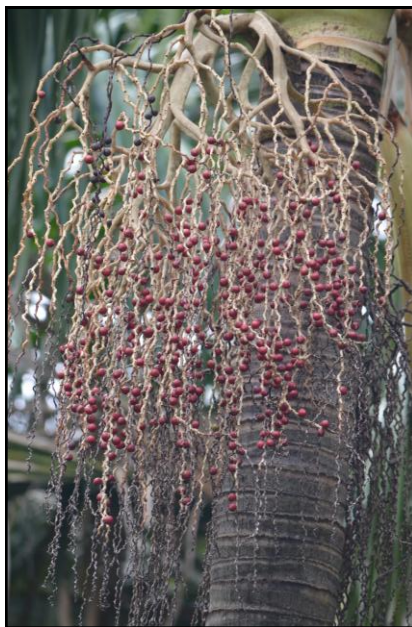
19 year old
Archontophoenix cunninghamiana
in the Beck garden.

12 specimen palms were downed by the high winds. Our palms do not seem to mind occasional flooding during heavy summer downpours. They have never shown any signs of disease or micro-nutritional deficiencies.

A. cunninghamiana is a very attractive palm for our landscape. They are commonly available at palm sales. They are strong growers with recommended fertilizer applications and twice weekly irrigation. This palm is smaller than many other crownshaft palms like *Satakentia* and *Roystonea* species. *A. cunninghamiana* has a very tropical look and seems to have the right scale for many Florida homes.



Archontophoenix cunninghamiana ramenta (brown scales)
on underside of midrib and leaflet rolled about midrib



Archontophoenix cunninghamiana fruit



Archontophoenix cunninghamiana
lavender flowers