

# GROWING *Coccothrinax argentata* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

*Submitted by Charlie Beck*

A few months ago, Dale Holton gave a masterful presentation on the best palms to grow in Palm Beach County. Dale described many Caribbean Basin palms which are well adapted to our locale. It was truly impressive that Dale actually located these palms growing in habitat in so many foreign countries.

Upon reflecting on Dale's presentation of the best palms to grow (mostly *Coccothrinax*), I realized that our native *Coccothrinax argentata* was left out. I thought I should add this palm to the list of the best palms to grow.

*Coccothrinax argentata* is a small, solitary palmate palm.

It is native to the Florida Keys ranging north along the eastern coast to southern Palm Beach County.



**Ten foot tall 85 year-old  
*Coccothrinax argentata*  
growing in the Beck Garden**

with 4.2 feet of stem. I was told that this palm graced the pool area of a Palm Beach mansion in season and out of season resided at the nursery. I was told that the palm was 60 years old.\* That makes our palm 85 years old this year. I don't remember what we paid for this palm but now I consider it priceless. We planted it in the ground by our house in Jupiter where it remained until 1999. In those 13 years, the stem grew 3.3 feet of wood and expanded from four inches to five inches in diameter. In 1999, we transplanted this palm to our current garden in suburban Lantana. It was very difficult digging this palm out of the

GROWING CONDITIONS IN OUR GARDEN FOR <i>Coccothrinax argentata</i>	
Location	4 miles from ocean in suburban Lantana
Soil	Packed shell rock
Irrigation	¾ inch applied twice a week
Fertilization	4 times a year with Palm special analysis
Light	Full sun
Micronutrient Deficiencies	None
Insect Damage	None observed
Cold Hardiness	No damage observed
Hurricane Resistance	Excellent

This palm also is native to the Bahamas. Henderson lumped several species into *C. argentata* which gave this species a much wider distribution. I do not believe Henderson's grouping is officially recognized. Typical habitats are coastal hammocks, pine rocklands, and well drained sandy or limestone soil. It is classified as "threatened" in Florida. *C. argentata* is highly tolerant to salt wind but not tolerant to long-term flooding by salt water. *C. argentata* is very slow growing but can reach 20 feet in height. The crown of leaves typically measures six feet in diameter in mature specimens. The stem can grow to six inches in diameter. The leaves are a distinctive blue green on the top and a showy silver color on the bottom. The leaves are deeply divided and have droopy tips which sway in the wind. This palm is best grown in full sun or light shade. The fruit is ½ inch in diameter, purple, and is highly sought after by native fauna. It is documented that Key deer readily eat the fruit. By observing its widespread distribution in natural areas of the Florida Keys, the fruit must be eaten and distributed by a wide range of birds and mammals. The leaves provide food for the larval form of the native Monk Skipper butterfly.

We purchased our first *C. argentata* in 1986. I found this palm in a nursery that was going out of business. It was in a 15 gallon container

ground. The roots were very dense and hard to cut. It was quite a job to remove this palm. We planted this palm by the front door of our new house. The transplant shocked the palm but it did eventually recover. Due to the transplant stress, the stem shrunk from a diameter of five inches to three inches. It took several years for the stem to regrow to a five inch diameter. The overall growth rate with regular fertilization and irrigation is two to three inches per year once the stem has formed.

We do have a second *C. argentata* which was planted in the ground in 2004. It grows in an area on the fringe of our irrigation system so it receives little supplemental water. The overall height of this plant is 3 ½ feet. It has started blooming and producing fruit at this small size. It will probably take decades for this palm to produce any measureable stem. This makes this palm an excellent candidate as a ground cover. I've seen many palms planted as groundcover, mostly *Livistona* species which quickly outgrow their situation. Even Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden planted *Livistona sp.* as a ground cover on either side of their overlook. Fifteen years later these palms are competing for light planted way too close and are over 20 feet tall. *C. argentata* would make an excellent groundcover with a predictable scale and growth rate.

I believe every palm enthusiast should grow all 11 Florida native palms. They all grow well in Palm Beach County if given the right growing conditions. I would rate *C. argentata* close to the top of the list. It is very wind and drought tolerant. It does require full sun or partial shade and it needs excellent drainage. The graceful fronds shimmer in the sunlight as the slightest breeze reveals the silver underside of the leaves. Its small scale makes it a prime palm for narrow foundation plantings.

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