

## **GROWING *Copernicia alba* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY**

*Submitted by Charlie Beck*

*Copernicia alba* is a small sized solitary palm native to Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Paraguay. Its southern limit is 30 degrees south of the equator. This makes it the only *Copernicia* species which occurs naturally outside of the tropics. It is reported to be the most cold hardy *Copernicia* and is hardy to zone 9a. This palm grows naturally in grasslands, savannas and seasonally flooded areas beside rivers. *C. alba* has a rounded crown of silver or green palmate fronds. Some specimen plants are reported to grow up to 500 leaves on a single plant. This palm is widely distributed over the countries listed. Estimates of 500 million palms still remain in the wild.

Although *C. alba* is widely distributed in habitat, it is rare in cultivation. We planted 5 specimens in our garden. These plants were distributed at one of our meetings as free give-away seedlings. In 7 years these 5 palms vary in overall height between 6-1/2' to 10'. That is an excellent growth rate for a *Copernicia* species. *C. alba* is similar in appearance to *C. prunifera*. *C. alba* is a much faster grower than *C. prunifera* in our garden. In 19 years *C. prunifera* has only grown to 4-



*Copernicia alba* growing in the  
Beck garden

1/2' in overall height. Our *C. alba* have silver fronds which I feel are more attractive than the grey/green fronds of *C. prunifera*. In habitat *C. alba* can reportedly grow 90' tall but more typical ultimate height in cultivation is about 30'. Remember *Sabal palmetto* is also listed as a palm which grows to 90' tall, but how often do you see a 90' tall *S. palmetto*? A 36 year old specimen of *C. alba* growing at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden (FTBG) has grown only 23' in height. Leaves measure 2-1/2' in diameter and heavily armed petioles grow 2' long. The scale of this palm is perfect for the average Palm Beach County lot. The deeply segmented leaves are very wind resistant so it's not surprising that *C. alba* survived Hurricane Andrew at FTBG. Mature stems can measure up to 10" in diameter. This is a full sun palm that has never shown micro nutritional deficiencies in our garden.

*C. alba* is similar in size to most *Coccothrinax* species but the growth rate is quite a bit faster. You also get the bonus of silver fronds which are highly wind resistant. If you don't have the room for a large *Latania* or a *Bismarkia* and you are fond of silver fronds, give *C. alba* a try. One of our sponsors, Caribbean Palms Nursery, offers this palm for sale.