

# GROWING *Phytelephas aequatorialis* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

*Submitted by Charlie Beck*

*Phytelephas aequatorialis* is a large, solidary, pinnate palm. Its leaflets may be regularly arranged in a single plain, or they can be grouped and arranged in several planes. This is the tallest of the six *Phytelephas* species, it can grow 45' tall but often tops out at 10'. This height refers to palms growing in its tropical, native habitat. In Palm Beach County it is a slow growing palm so don't expect rapid vertical growth. In habitat fronds can measure up to 30' long, even though stems only grow to one foot in diameter. Native habitat ranges from wet, coastal plain to 5000' elevation on the western Andes slope in Columbia, Ecuador and Peru. Most often, *P. aequatorialis* is found in large stands along river banks. Seed is often dispersed by flood water.

The common name for this palm is the Ecuadorean Ivory Palm. Its seed is white and very hard. *P. aequatorialis* is the source of vegetable ivory in Ecuador. Artisans carve figurines from this vegetable ivory. Buttons are also made from this seed. Being a dioecious palm only female plants produce vegetable ivory.

Back in the 1990's, the past president of our Society, Dale Holton, imported vegetable ivory carvings directly from Ecuador. Dale established a relationship with the exporter and eventually obtained some habitat collected seed for growing at Holton Nursery. Some of us palm enthusiasts were lucky to purchase this relatively rare palm from Dale. It was unknown if this tropical palm would grow in Palm Beach County. Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden has only a single specimen of this palm planted in their garden.

We planted our only specimen of *P. aequatorialis* in 2004. It is planted in a shady, low lying area which occasionally floods after repeated heavy rainfall. In ten years it has grown into an impressive specimen. Its fronds measure 18' long. No stem has yet formed but the base of the palm is approximately one foot in diameter. The leaflets are grouped and are displayed on differing planes. I believe this is the preferred form- much showier than palms with regularly spaced leaflets. Our palm has bloomed for the first time this year. It is a male with long showy inflorescences with large flowers.

Even though the natural range of this palm straddles the equator, this palm has performed well in our sub-tropical garden. There was no noticeable setback of our palm after the record cold winters of 2009 and 2010. Our garden is located 4 miles from the ocean near Lantana, but this palm also thrives at Holton Nursery- also located near Lantana but 7 miles from the coast. Dale Holton has told me that this palm is cold sensitive when grown in pots but is more cold hardy when planted in the ground.

Holton Nursery has a few *P. aequatorialis* available for sale. If you have the space for this beautiful palm in your garden you should give it a try. It will certainly attract a lot of attention. With regular irrigation and fertilization it will grow a magnificent crown of fronds. Vertical growth will take decades of growth which is probably good when considering the large crown growing on such a small stem and the likelihood of needing to survive a hurricane.



68 year old *P. aequatorialis* at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden



*P. aequatorialis* in Dale Holton's garden



*P. aequatorialis* leaf detail



Fruit of *P. aequatorialis*  
(Photo submitted to Palm, Pedia by La Tagueria)

*Phytelephas aequatorialis*

