

GROWING FEATURED THIS MONTH: *Pritchardia beccariana* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Pritchardia beccariana is a medium sized costapalmate palm native to Hawaii. It grows in very wet forest on gentle slopes at elevations between 1,000 – 4,200 feet. It occurs on the Big Island on lava flows in Volcanoes National Park. Populations are scattered or occur in small groups. It is estimated that a thousand or more remain in seven known populations. It is thought to have occurred at lower elevations, even at sea level, prior to deforestation. Due to habitat destruction and predation by rats, pigs and other grazing animals, this palm is considered a Species of Concern.

P. beccariana is solitary and monoecious. Even though the leaves are costapalmate, they are nearly flat, unlike most other Hawaiian *Pritchardia* species. It resembles *Pritchardia pacifica* which is usually considered the most attractive *Pritchardia* species and in my opinion might be the most beautiful palmate palm in existence. Don Hodel states in his book, *Loulu the Hawaiian Palm*, “perhaps *P. beccariana* is the most handsome and imposing loulu.” Loulu is the common name for Hawaiian *Pritchardia* species. Hodel also mentioned that the taxonomist who named *P. beccariana* described it as “a beautiful palm of fine symmetry.”

P. beccariana can grow 60’ tall in habitat, but it usually tops out at 40 feet. The leaves are large. They can measure up to 6’ across and be held on 6’ long petioles. Stems typically measure 10” in diameter. Mature fruit are large and shiny black. They can be spherical or oval and measure about 1.5” long. The seeds are edible and are compared in taste to coconuts.

Lucky for us, *P. beccariana* is much more cold tolerant than *P. pacifica* and it is a fast grower in Palm Beach County. Our 10 year old specimen measures 12’ to the growing point. The stem measures 7” in diameter. The leaves measure 4’ across and the petioles are 4’ long. For comparison our *Pritchardia pacifica* leaves also measure 4’ across but the petioles are 3’ long, so the crown of leaves is more compact. Our *P. beccariana* came through the record cold winters of 2009 and 2010 without any apparent damage to the leaves. Many years later, as the palm grew, a minor constriction of the stem did appear. This was a historical record of those cold winter seasons. *P. beccariana* is not affected by periodic short term flooding.

P. beccariana grows in a wet forest with a relative evenly distributed precipitation, so it does require supplemental irrigation in Palm Beach County. Our garden is irrigated twice a week, only if it hasn’t rained. This seems like an adequate level of moisture for this palm. We planted our specimen in a partially shaded area and it has since grown into a full sun situation. I think it can be grown in full sun at an early age if it is slowly adapted to the sun.

Keep in mind that some *Pritchardia* species like *P. pacifica* and *P. thurstonii* are susceptible to lethal yellowing. I do not know if *P. beccariana* is susceptible or not, but I do know that it has performed well in our garden over the last 10 years. *P. beccariana* is not a self-cleaning palm but it is easily trimmed with a pole pruner.

P. beccariana is not a palm commonly planted in South Florida. Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden does not list this palm on their plant list. This palm is rarely available at palm sales, but our Palm and Cycad Society has obtained a few of these palms and they will be auctioned at our upcoming monthly meetings. I strongly recommend that you give it a try.



Pritchardia thurstonii (left) and
Pritchardia beccariana (right)
Same age size comparison in the Beck Garden



Pritchardia beccariana (above)
Pritchardia pacifica (below) leaf comparison

