

GROWING *Pritchardia pacifica* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Pritchardia pacifica is a palm most closely related to the American genera *Acoelorrhaphe*, *Brahea*, *Copernicia*, and *Serenoa*. It is also related to Asian/Pacific genera *Johannesteijsmannia*, *Licuala*, and *Livistona*. Its flat, palmate fronds have stiff leaf tips similar to *Copernicia baileyana* and the emerald green color of *Licuala grandis*. You can clearly see a resemblance of *P. pacifica* to other desirable genera.

Although its common name is the Fiji Fan Palm, the actual origin of *P. pacifica* has not been determined. Naturalized populations have been found throughout the South and West Pacific islands, but its occurrence is thought to be due to cultivation. Buoyant seeds might also be a factor in its widespread distribution from its place of origin.

P. pacifica is the most commonly cultivated species of its genera. It is widely planted throughout the tropics. Donald Hodel, palm taxonomist and *Pritchardia* expert, states that non-native *P. pacifica* is more common in Hawaiian urban landscapes than any of the 24 native species. The reason for its popularity is clear - it is an incredibly beautiful palm!

P. pacifica is a solitary, medium sized palm. Stems can grow 45' tall and measure 10" in diameter. Fronds are green on both sides and measure about 4' across. Leaf segments are mostly united. Petioles are unarmed. This is a monoecious palm which does not require cross pollination to produce viable seed. *P. pacifica* has small, blue-black, fruit which measures ½" in diameter. Its flowers are bright yellow.

P. pacifica inflorescence length is equal to, or shorter than, the fronds. General appearance of *P. pacifica* is similar to the equally attractive *P. thurstonii*. *P. thurstonii* can be distinguished by its much longer inflorescence which grows beyond its fronds and it's slightly smaller scale.

P. pacifica fell out of favor in South Florida back in the 1970's when Lethal Yellowing (LY) swept through the area killing many susceptible palms. Some of the palms most affected were *Cocos nucifera* (Coconut Palm), *Adonidia merrillii* (Christmas Palm) and *P. pacifica* (Fiji Fan Palm). LY resistant Coconut Palms were bred, but the other affected palms were left on their own to either survive or die. For a long time enthusiasts were discouraged from planting susceptible species. Lately, there has been a resurgence in planting *Adonidia merrillii*. These palms must have been propagated from the survivors because they seem to be LY resistant. Hopefully the same applies to *P. pacifica* which are now offered for sale. We haven't lost any *P. pacifica* in our garden due to LY.

P. pacifica is a very attractive palm at all stages of development. Once planted and established, it quickly produces a round crown of emerald green fronds. In Palm Beach County (PBC), it might be the fastest growing *Pritchardia* species. Although fronds are not self-cleaning, palms only hold a few dried leaves which can easily be removed. It's adaptable to growing on a variety of soil types - sand, marl and limestone. It appreciates regular irrigation and fertilization. In our garden I've never noticed any micro-nutritional deficiencies. It's also salt tolerant and wind resistant. I've seen healthy, mature specimens growing on Jupiter Island.

Some older reference books recommend planting *P. pacifica* in USDA Plant Hardiness Zone 11, but newer books recommend Zone 10B. No doubt a freeze such as the one in 1989, when temperatures dipped to 26°F, would not bode well for this palm. In our garden (4 miles inland) *P. pacifica* showed little effect from the cold winters of 2009 & 2010.

I recently received photos of a 25-30' tall *P. pacifica* thriving in Caloosa which is a neighborhood located 12 miles inland in northern PBC. This neighborhood is right down the road from Pratt & Whitney. The palm was planted in 1993 and in 2017 it measures 25-30' tall. It was strategically planted in a micro-climate surrounded by a pond, a pool and the SE corner of a house. The soil in this area is a sand/marl mix. I was surprised that *P. pacifica* could thrive this far west (see photo page 2)

Lethal Yellowing is less common than in the past. Other susceptible palms are widely planted and are thriving. It's time for replanting South Florida with *P. pacifica*. This palm is the perfect scale for a standard lot size and its tropical look will remind you of Key West.



Pritchardia pacifica - 24 years old in Caloosa
(Photo by Frank Genung)



Pritchardia pacifica - 6 years old
in Beck Garden



Pritchardia pacifica
at Deerfield Beach Arboretum



Pritchardia pacifica
Leaf detail