

# GROWING *Sabal etonia* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

*Submitted by Charlie Beck*

Florida has 11 native palms, but only 4 palm species are currently considered native to Palm Beach County (PBC). (Historical records indicate that *Roystonea regia* was a fifth PBC native, but cold snaps virtually eliminated these palms from PBC natural areas hundreds of years ago).

Two of the native species, *Sabal palmetto* (Cabbage Palm) and *Serenoa repens* (Saw Palmetto), are well known and widely distributed. *Coccothrinax argentata* (Silver Thatch Palm) is a rare find in southern coastal Palm Beach County. I have not yet encountered it in south county habitat. Historically it ranged north to Lake Worth.

The fourth PBC native palm is *Sabal etonia* (Scrub Palmetto). We should all know this palm because it's a Florida endemic, as described in Scott Zona's Monograph of Sabal, 1990. It's the only native palm that is found exclusively in Florida. In nature, *S. etonia* is found growing on deep sand ridges in southeast and central Florida. There was also a population discovered in western Florida near Bradenton. It typically grows with Sand Pine and xerophytic Oaks in very well drained, scrub habitat. Most *S. etonia* have disappeared due to urban expansion on the Atlantic Coastal Ridge. It has also disappeared on the Central Florida Lake Wales Ridge due to clearing for agricultural. Although much of its natural habitat is gone, it grows in two large protected areas found in Central Florida, Ocala National Forest (northcentral FL) and Archbold Biological Station (northwest of Lake Okeechobee).

Lucky for us, PBC had the foresight to preserve several natural scrub habitats where this palm can be found growing in all of its glory! It can also be found growing along the railroad tracks which run west of I95. I found *S. etonia* growing at the Seacrest Scrub Natural Area in Boynton Beach. This is a site where Gopher Tortoises can also be found. This location is typical habitat for *S. etonia*- high and dry. *S. etonia* is found in full sun and in the shade of Sand Pines and *S. palmetto*. *Serenoa repens* also grows at this site. On the day that I visited, a field of many *S. etonia* were recovering after being cut to the ground. I assume this was done to reduce understory biomass for fire suppression purposes. There are homes located next to the preserve. This palm is considered fire resistant and is reported to quickly regenerate after burns.

*S. etonia* is a small, palmate palm with either a subterranean or a short upright stem. If upright, the stem's maximum height is 6'. It holds 4-7 green fronds which are strongly costapalmate. The costa extends deeply into the leaf and is prominently recurved. Leaf segments are deeply segmented and hair like fibers emerge from the leaflet edges. As with other *Sabal sp.*, the petioles are smooth. The inflorescences emerge upright and do not extend beyond the leaves. White flowers are fragrant and attract butterflies and other native pollinators. As fruits form, infructescence can be weighted down and lie on the ground. The infructescence has a bushy appearance. Mature, round fruit are brown or black and measure ½" across. Birds and other wildlife eat the fruit. *S. etonia* is a host plant for the Monk Skipper Butterfly.

How do you distinguish *S. etonia* from similar Florida natives?

Distinguishing *Sabal etonia* from *Serenoa repens* is easy. *S. repens* has true palmate leaves without a costa. It also has teeth along its petioles. *S. repens* may have subterranean stems but it tends to form multiple crowns along the stem and is usually not solitary in form.

*Sabal minor* usually grows in moist locations. Habitat rarely or never overlaps. *S. minor* and *S. etonia* have similar stature and stems but *S. minor* leaves are weakly costapalmate- not strongly costapalmate. *S. minor* inflorescences are much longer and grow beyond the leaves. *S. minor* also has smaller globose fruit.

Immature *S. palmetto* look similar to *S. etonia*. Both palms have strongly costapalmate, recurved fronds. The most apparent distinguishing feature is the inflorescence. If the palm is under 9' in overall height and it's blooming with inflorescences shorter than the leaves, it is *S. etonia*. *S. palmetto*, under 9' in overall height, usually have not yet bloomed. When *S. palmetto* does bloom, the inflorescences are longer than the leaves. At that stage, the entire crown is noticeably larger than *S. etonia*.

We planted *S. etonia* in our garden 17 years ago. You might think that a scrub palm, native to high and dry sandy ridges might not perform well in an irrigated, sometimes inundated, garden setting. That is not the case. It has grown steadily without any problems at all. This is a palm perfectly adapted to growing in our sandy soil. Once established there's no need to irrigate or fertilize it. Of course, with irrigation and fertilization it should grow faster. Our palm is only 5' tall overall and it appears to be forming an upright stem. You should not be concerned with this

palm running all along the ground into pathways, based on our palm staying put after 17 years. I would not expect this palm to spread like *Serenoa repens*. Our palm is a mature blooming specimen.

*S. etonia* is a great palm for PBC. It's especially well adapted to growing in our sandy soils. It grows in sun or shade. It's drought tolerant, cold hearty and has a moderate to high salt tolerance. It grows in wet or dry soils. It requires no maintenance after it's established and it should not outgrow its situation. It makes a great groundcover and can add texture to your garden understory. And don't forget it's our only Florida endemic palm! If you don't have room for it in your garden, admire it at one of our PBC preserved scrub habitats. There's plenty of seed available in habitat so give it a try.



Palm Beach County Natural Area, Boynton Beach



Palm Beach County Natural Area  
mature *Sabal etonia* with immature fruit



Palm Beach County Natural Area  
*Sabal etonia* with fragrant, white flowers



Palm Beach County Natural Area  
*Sabal etonia* regenerating after clearing

***Sabal etonia*:- Frond Comparison of Select Florida Native Palmate Palms**



*Serenoa repens*  
Palmate frond  
(no costa)



*Sabal minor*  
Weakly costapalmate  
frond



*Sabal etonia*  
Strongly, costapalmate,  
recurved frond  
Blooms on short  
inflorescence when  
below 9' overall height



17 year old *Sabal etonia*  
In Beck garden