

GROWING *Areca catechu* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Areca catechu is a small to medium sized, pinnate palm which is widely cultivated throughout the tropics. The common name is the betel-nut palm. It can be readily found growing in the Tropical Pacific, Asia and Eastern Africa. The origin of this species is uncertain but it is assumed to be from Malaysian rainforest areas. Being monoecious, this palm can produce viable seeds from a single plant. Even though this palm's footprint is small it can grow to 100' tall in the tropics. I've never seen this palm taller than 30' in Florida.

You might ask "why is this palm so widely cultivated across the tropics?" The answer is that the seeds of this palm are coveted for their intoxicating properties. Betel-nut seeds are chewed with slaked lime and pepper vine leaves. The mild narcotic effect can be addictive. Chewing the seeds is reported to be part of certain Hindu rituals. The negative effect of frequent betel-nut chewing is that it stains gums and saliva red and stains teeth black. A friend of mine from India told me that black teeth and red gums are a common sight in his native country and many other tropical areas. If you remember the stage play *South Pacific*, there was a character named Bloody Mary. The reason she was named Bloody Mary was because of her red stained gums and saliva due to betel-nut chewing.

Areca catechu has three distinct varieties. The common form of this palm has emerald green leaves and crownshaft. The dwarf variety has similar coloration but has tight clusters of leaves which are about a foot long. *A. catechu var. alba* has a yellow crownshaft, a stem with yellow overtones, and orange or yellow petioles.

The common green form is incredibly beautiful when grown in the tropics. Brenda and I have seen this palm cultivated in private gardens in Central and South America, Australia, and New Caledonia. When I saw *Areca catechu* growing in Don Brainerd's private garden in Ecuador, it left an indelible impression on me. The emerald green color and the tropical lushness make this palm a worthy candidate for inclusion in your garden.

Areca catechu var. alba is more of a curiosity in my mind than a "must have" palm. The yellow coloration looks like it's suffering from a nutritional deficiency in my opinion. I did attempt to grow this variety years ago with no success. I'm not sure why it died but it died in the pot. Possibly it's more cold sensitive than the green form.

The dwarf form of *A. catechu* maintains all of the emerald green coloration but has comically short leaves. I've tried planting this dwarf variety in our garden on many occasions with no success. I'm not sure if it's cold sensitive, or it doesn't like our sandy soil, or if nematodes attack its roots. These palms seem to grow just fine in pots so my recommendation is to grow them in pots and protect them from our severe winter cold snaps. Apparently these palms do not necessarily hold their dwarf characteristic from seed produced by this variety. I've seen many vendors label *A. catechu* "dwarf" on palms which are obviously not dwarfs. I would recommend buying large palms which already show mature stems and very short leaves so that you can be certain that the palm is actually a dwarf. These mature specimen plants are expensive.

Areca catechu (standard green form) is not a surefire palm in Palm Beach County. It is somewhat cold sensitive. I doubt any *A. catechu* palms survived the 1989 South Florida freeze. Living plants at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden (FTBG) were planted out after 2002 which indicates that none of their plants survived the 1989 winter. *A. catechu* did survive the record cold winters of 2009 and 2010 at FTBG. We lost a few *A. catechu* specimens in our garden after the 2009 and 2010 winter seasons, but a few plants did survive the frequent extended cold temperatures in those years. It appears that this palm's cold tolerance is quite variable. For this reason, planting clusters of this solitary palm might be the best strategy for success. *A. catechu* is a relative fast grower. It can be grown in full sun or in deep shade. The

beautiful cluster of *A. catechu* planted at FTBG is planted in deep shade under a high canopy of trees. It's the most attractive group of *A. catechu* that I have seen outside of the tropics.

The oldest *A. catechu* planted in our garden are 12 years old. I added a specimen last year that showed some dwarf tendencies but have since grown out and appears to be the standard form. What is unique about this palm is the rich green color of the leaves and the crownshaft. The leaves tend to be more upright when grown in full sun. Our 12 year old plants vary from 14' to 18' tall measured to the top of the crownshaft. These palms have never required any minor nutritional supplements when fertilized at recommended rates. Periodic inundation hasn't had any negative effect on these palms. Our shade grown leaves measure 4' long.

As you can see in the photo of FTBG's *A. catechu*, it is hard to plant a more beautiful cluster of palms. I plan to add more *A. catechu* to my collection and I encourage you to do the same. These palms are not expensive and are fast growing, so they are easy to replace if we experience a killer frost.



Areca catechu, 12 years old
in the Beck Garden



Areca catechu, 10 years old
at FTBG



Areca catechu, 10 years old
at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden



Areca catechu dwarf at Nong Nooch
Tropical Garden, photo by Scott Zona
courtesy of Palmworld.org



Areca catechu at Don Brainerd's
Garden in Ecuador



Areca catechu var. alba crownshaft,
courtesy of the Australian Palm Society