

# GROWING

## *Chamaedorea brachypoda* and *Chamaedorea stolonifera*

### IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

*Submitted by Charlie Beck*

*Chamaedorea brachypoda* and *Chamaedorea stolonifera* are small palms with simple bifid leaves. Although they are considered clustering palms, they do not form a clump of stems tightly packed around the center. These palms spread by the use of above or below ground shoots which create space between the stems. All palms in the genus *Chamaedorea* are dioecious, requiring both male and female plants for seed production.

*Chamaedorea brachypoda* is a lowland species native to the Atlantic Coast of Guatemala and Honduras. This palm is considered critically endangered in the wild. It was originally described in 1947 from specimens found in a forested area in Izabal, Guatemala. It is reported that this location has been deforested and is now used for cattle grazing. A small population of this palm remains under the shade of a single *Attalea* sp. This surviving palm cluster is repeatedly eaten to the ground by cattle but survives due to its spreading rhizomes sprouting new stems. In undisturbed habitat this palm typically grows in dense shade. Average annual rainfall in this palm's natural range is approximately 76" which is 22% more than what we receive in West Palm Beach.

Don Hodel described an interesting historical account of *Chamaedorea stolonifera* in his book, *Chamaedorea Palms*. *C. stolonifera* was collected in Mexico and was cultivated in England and Germany as early as 1882. The original description and naming of this palm was based on cultivated specimens growing at Kew Garden in England. This palm wasn't seen in habitat again until 1949. Until the 1970's most cultivated specimens were male and only 3 female palms were known to exist. In 1989, female specimens were discovered growing in Chiapas, Mexico on Atlantic limestone slopes at elevations of 2000-2600'. Collection of female plants were made for propagation purposes. Currently, *C. stolonifera* is considered endangered in the wild.

Both of these palms have a similar running growth habit. *C. brachypoda* spreads by below ground rhizomes and *C. stolonifera* typically spreads by above ground stolons, even though stolons have been reported to traverse sidewalks underground. The rate of stem production is similar in both of these species. Distance between stems of *C. stolonifera* is about twice that of *C. brachypoda*, so it spreads more quickly. In our garden, after 18 years of growth, the *C. brachypoda* clump is 8' across, and after 17 years the *C. stolonifera* clump is about 14' across. The size of the clump can be easily restricted by cutting or removing the pencil thick stems. These palms are not aggressive spreaders such as *Rhapis excelsa*, the Lady Palm.

In our garden *C. brachypoda* stems have grown 6' tall. *C. stolonifera* stems are a little shorter at 4-1/2' tall. Stems typically grow straight and remain vertical. Stems do not tend to bend or lean as do some of the other *Chamaedorea* species. Both palms grow well in our Palm Beach County sugar sand. Neither palm has shown any nutritional deficiency when regularly irrigated and fertilized at recommended rates. Considering that *C. stolonifera* grows on solid limestone in its native habitat, it appears quite adaptable. Both of these palms look best when grown in full or partial shade. They will survive in full sun but the fronds will be lighter green. These palms are cold hardy in our climate. Neither palm showed any damage after our record cold winters of 2009 and 2010.

Leaves have a similar shape but *C. brachypoda* leaves are wider and lighter green, sometimes with a hint of mottling. *C. stolonifera* has thicker dark green leaves held on shorter petioles. Old dried fronds persist a little longer on *C. brachypoda* but they seem to disappear under the healthy emergent foliage.

Both of these palms make an attractive ground cover in a garden situation. Even though the spreading habit of these palms is easily controlled, you might rather grow them in a large pot. The tight cluster of bifid leaves could create a contrast in texture, which might be just what you need to beautify a spot in your garden.

Availability of these palms is not good. Due to the limited number of female plants, seed is not available. Nurseries are less inclined to propagate palms by division. I plan to dig up some stems and establish them in pots to share at upcoming society meetings.



*Chamaedorea brachypoda* (above and below)



*Chamaedorea stolonifera* (above and below)

