GROWING
Copernicia macroglossa
IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Copernicia macroglossa is well known in South Florida as the Cuban Petticoat Palm. Many specimens are planted in botanical gardens but it is uncommon in private gardens. This is unfortunate because it has many unique characteristics. The leaves emerge in a whirl on very short petioles. The old leaves remain on the stem and form a distinctive petticoat which remains for many years. Even young palms are very attractive and they become more impressive as they grow. *C. macroglossa* is cold hardy in coastal Palm Beach County. The 2009-2010 record cold winters did not damage any of the five specimens in our garden.

C. macroglossa is a monoecious palm native to western and central Cuba. Natural habitats include savannas, hilly areas and areas beside salt marshes. In habitat, the stems can grow 20' tall and 5-8" in diameter. Stiff semicircular leaves can measure 5-7' wide and are thorny on the margins. Inflorescences extend beyond the leaves.

What kind of growth should you expect with recommended fertilization and irrigation? We originally planted six specimen plants. Four plants grew at a moderate rate. After 19 years overall heights vary between 8' and 11'. Footprints vary between 8' and 10' in diameter. Two of the remaining specimens did not grow as well. I've given up replanting at one location. There must be something in the soil that this palm does not like even though another specimen grew 11' tall just beside it. At another location after three replacements a specimen grows very slowly - 1' tall after 8 years in the ground.

**Nineteen year old
Copernicia macroglossa
growing in the Beck garden.**

I have noticed after growing many palms and especially *Copernicia* species that genetic variability is a most important factor. Not all palm seedlings are meant to grow into mature specimen plants. Even though plants look healthy when grown in pots some are natural runts and will never perform in the ground. I have a grove of *Veitchia sp.* which produces a carpet of seedlings on the ground. Only the seedlings with the most vigorous growth survive; the rest are stunted or shaded out. In a nursery setting, all seedlings are pampered and many inferior plants can reach salable size. Recently I sought out a *Pseudophoenix vinifera* at our palm sale. One vendor had 3 plants small, medium and large. All three plants were grown from the same seed batch. Of course the prices reflected the plant size but the largest most expensive plant was the best choice because of its relative vigor. Often palm venders know which of their plants are most vigorous and they will share this information if asked. Dale Holton has helped me choose superior plants from his nursery. With large *Copernicia sp*. Dale told me to choose the plant with the widest petiole base and sure enough these palms display very rapid growth. So don't be afraid to give up on palms which don't perform. They may never grow into the specimen plants that you expected.

Several *Copernicia sp.* can show minor nutritional deficiencies. Potassium, magnesium, and boron can be deficient in our sandy soil even though fertilizer is applied at regular intervals. Potassium and magnesium are less a problem with *C. macroglossa* but boron deficiency can occur. Boron deficiency in *C. macroglossa* causes the leaves to display accordion folds. Remember that boron deficiency can be

cured by applying to the root zone 4-5 ounces of 20 Mule Team Borax dissolved in 5 gallons of water. Repeat at 3 month intervals if deficiency persists. Do not over apply boron because it can be toxic in larger quantities.

So give *Copernicia macroglossa* a try. Its unique appearance will certainly draw attention of your neighbors. These palms are wind resistant and cold hardy in coastal areas. At Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden many specimens survived category 5 Hurricane Andrew. Grow it in full sun and feed it regularly. It is well adapted to our Palm Beach County climate.

Copernicia macroglossa leaf detail