

GROWING *Arenga australasica* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Arenga australasica is a medium to large sized, clumping palm native to northern Australia. *A. australasica* was originally thought to be widely distributed throughout the Top End of Australia. In 2011, Dowe and Jones divided *A. australasica* into two species: *A. australasica* which is restricted to Cape York, Queensland at Latitude 10.7 degrees S and *A. microphylla* which is widely distributed across Northern Territory and also occurs in Queensland and New Guinea. *A. microphylla* has a distribution ranging to Latitude 18 degrees S. This division is so recent, I could not find any reference to *A. microphylla* other than in a Northern Territory Government Department of Land Resource Management document. Kew's checklist of valid names does not include *A. microphylla* at this time. Considering that *A. australasica* is restricted to the most northern tip of Queensland, Australia, I'll bet that all *A. australasica* that are in cultivation today are actually *A. microphylla*. Until Kew lists *A. microphylla* as a valid name, I'll call it *A. australasica* in this article.

A. australasica is native to coastal lowland rainforest ranging from sea level to an elevation of 700 feet. In habitat, individual stems can reach heights of 45 to 60' but maximum height in South Florida is typically 10-20 feet. *A. australasica* is monocarpic which means that individual stems die after flowering and seed production is completed. It does take many years of growth before flowering commences. This monocarpic habit limits the ultimate height of the stems. Inflorescences are a showy yellow color and mature seed color ranges from orange to red. Be careful handling the fruit because the fruit contains a skin irritant. In habitat leaves can grow 7 – 10' long. Leaves are dark green above and silver below. The pinnae are wide and have notched margins. The stems are covered in attractive black fiber.

Considering the native range of this tropical palm (10.7 to 18 degrees S latitude), it's surprising how well it grows in Palm Beach County (26.4 to 27 degrees N latitude). That translates to an 850 mile difference in average latitude between its native range and Palm Beach County. To put that distance in perspective, that is the distance from West Palm Beach to Washington DC. That is quite a different growing climate! Our *A. australasica* were planted in 2001 and came through the record cold winters of 2009 and 2010 with no cold damage. Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden (FTBG) has many *A. australasica* which survived the 1989 freeze with a recorded low temperature of 27 degrees Fahrenheit.

Both of our plants are flowering and fruiting after 13 years of growth. The tallest flowering stem is only 15' tall, so *A. australasica* is definitely height limited due to its monocarpic habit. Stems measure 6" in diameter. Leaves measure 13' in length and the overall canopy footprint is 30 feet. Our palms are planted in shade. Sun grown plants will have shorter leaves. Unfortunately our palms are situated in areas which are difficult to photograph so I included a photo of an old FTBG palm for overall viewing.

What makes *A. australasica* my favorite *Arenga* species? It has a much more tropical look than the more common, thin leaf, *A. engleri*. It looks quite similar to *A. tremula* but has grown much faster in our garden. *A. australasica* does not take up as much real estate and is more cold hardy than *A. undulatifolia*. *A. australasica* grows equally well in areas prone to flooding as it does in areas with good drainage. The contrast between the dark green upper leaf surface with the silver underside is quite attractive. It grows equally well in full sun or shade. Although the footprint is large due to its clumping habit, size can be controlled by thinning stems. Overall height is well suited for landscaping around one story homes. Hurricane resistance should also be very good. With recommended fertilizing, I've never noticed any nutritional deficiencies.



13 year old *Arenga australasica*
in the Beck garden.



Arenga australasica inflorescence and
black fiber on stem in the Beck garden



Turk & Sue Rowlands lending scale to *Arenga*
australasica during at FTBG



Arenga australasica immature
fruit in the Beck garden