

GROWING
Arenga undulatifolia
IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Arenga undulatifolia is a monoecious, pinnate palm native to the Philippine Islands, Borneo and Sulawesi. It reportedly grows on limestone soils. This is primarily a clumping palm but it has also been reported to grow as a solitary palm. In habitat this palm might reach 30' in overall height. The most distinguishing feature of this palm is its wide leaflets which have wavy (undulating) edges. The leaflets are dark green above and silver below. As with all *Arenga* species, this palm is monocarpic. Inflorescences emerge at the top of mature stems and then continue to emerge down the stem. After this process is complete, the stem dies. *Arenga undulatifolia* was also known as *Arenga ambong* in the past. Both have been lumped together as *Arenga undulatifolia*.

My first palm book was Palms in Australia by David Jones. This book was first published in 1984. At the time it was one of the most complete palm references available. On page 162 was the most exotic palm that I have ever seen. *Arenga undulatifolia* looked so tropical I was sure it could never grow in Palm Beach County. I still remember showing this picture to my friends at work even though my friends did not share my enthusiasm for palms. Along with *Cyrtostachys renda*, this palm was instantly my favorite. Then on a trip to Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden I saw *A. undulatifolia* growing outside the Rare Plant House. I was still certain it would only be short lived 80 miles north in Palm Beach County.

In our Palm and Cycad Society's early days, society volunteers helped plant and maintain the Norton Sculpture Garden. At one of these work days, Brenda and I first befriended society members, Dale Holton and Bob Grimm. Almost 25 years later both of these members are still friends and are still palm enthusiasts. There are some real benefits to volunteering! During work at the Norton Sculpture Garden I discovered a beautiful mature specimen of *A. undulatifolia*. Wow, it can be grown in Palm Beach County.

We planted our first *A. undulatifolia* in 1993. It was the year we bought our "garden to be." We planted three more a year later. Our plants have grown well over the years. The only setback occurred after the record cold winters of 2009 and 2010. Our oldest specimen lost its tallest stem due to the cold but it hardly affected the beauty of this palm. The original planting is located in full sun. Our three additional specimen plants are grown in shade. The shaded palms are not as vigorous as the one grown in full sun but they are quite healthy in that situation.

This palm is a vigorous clumper and can take up a lot of real estate. The footprint of our 21 year old palm is a diameter of 22 feet. Its overall height is 15 feet. In the early days I trimmed off all of the suckers so that a single rosette of fronds remained. As work in the garden multiplied, I gave up on this trimming and let this palm take on its natural form. If you read the literature on this palm moist soil and good drainage is recommended. All four of our palms flood regularly after repeated heavy rains. Sometimes our palms are inundated for days at a time with no negative effects. As with most *Arenga* species minor nutritional deficiencies do not seem to be a problem when fertilized at recommended rates.

Arenga undulatifolia is rarely planted in Palm Beach County. This would be an excellent choice as a ground cover below a grouping of three taller palms. This palm is a showstopper and will attract a lot of attention. Remember that you can trim away all of the suckers to reduce its footprint. This palm is probably untested in the western portions of our county but it is certainly worth a try.

Arenga undulatifolia, 21 years old
grown in the Beck garden



Top leaf detail of *Arenga undulatifolia*



Under leaf detail of *Arenga undulatifolia*

