

GROWING *Arenga westerhoutii* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Arenga westerhoutii (a-REN-ga WES' ter-HOOT-ee-eye) is widely distributed in tropical Asia. It is native to northeast India, Thailand, Myanmar peninsular, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos and southern China. It grows from sea level to 1,500' elevation - often on limestone hills. The native soils are considered moist to wet.

A. westerhoutii is a large solitary palm with pinnate leaves. Like most *Arenga* species it is monocarpic. It grows to a mature height, then ceases vertical growth and begins flowering from top to bottom of the stem. At that point the palm dies.

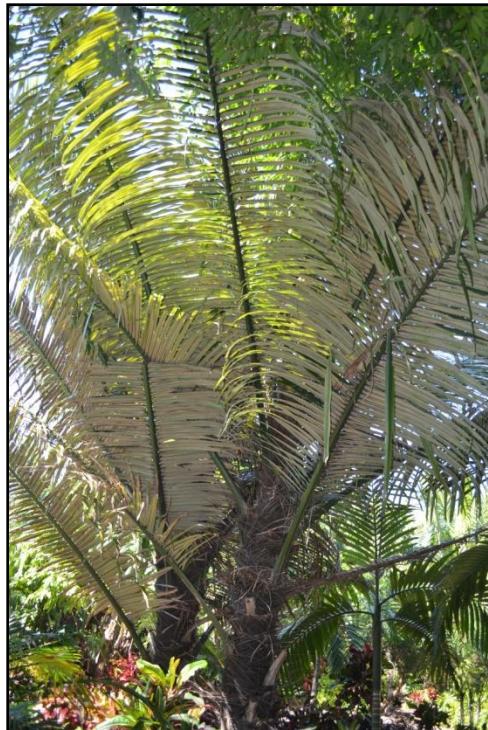
In habitat, *A. westerhoutii* stems can grow 60' tall and 2' in diameter. Leaves are mostly ascending and can measure 15-20' long. Unlike the more common *A. pinnata*, the leaflets grow in a single plane. The leaflets can extend 3' on both sides of the rachis. The leaves are dark green above and a striking silver-rust brown color below. Emerging leaves rival all other palms in beauty. The new leaf is held upright and is stiff enough to show off the unique coloration on the leaf underside.

Although this palm is available, it is rarely planted in South Florida. Reference books list this palm as a zone 11 plant which is marginal in zone 10b. My experience with this palm suggests that it is not that cold sensitive. My specimen came through the record 2009-2010 cold winters with no ill effects. Long-term Palm Society members, Lew and Cathy Burger, report that their specimen is one of their most robust palms and they did not see any cold damage in 2009 and 2010. They planted their specimen five years ago and it currently is 20-30' in overall height.

The stems of *A. westerhoutii* resemble those of *A. pinnata* except they are not as large. The stems are covered with thick black, woven fibers which include 2' long upright spines. This is a very attractive feature. The only negative aspect of this fiber is that it must be removed before cutting the stem with a chainsaw. The fiber instantly clogs chainsaws. We had a large *A. pinnata* which was downed by the category 1 hurricane in 2004 and it took hours to remove the fiber before we could cut through the stem to release the huge root ball.

Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden planted *A. westerhoutii* at the entrance to their newly built Science Village, so I'm sure many palm admirers will become newly acquainted with this beautiful palm. I have never noticed this palm elsewhere at Fairchild.

I first saw *A. westerhoutii* at Flecker Botanical Garden in Cairns, Australia during a post biennial trip with the International Palm Society. I immediately had to acquire this palm for our garden. We planted our specimen 12 years ago. This palm has grown 8' of stem with 18' long fronds. The stem measures 19" in diameter including the fiber. It is smaller and slower growing than *A. pinnata*. In 7 years our *A. pinnata* is twice as tall as the *A. westerhoutii* and has 25' long fronds and a 28" diameter stem. The hurricane resistance of *A. westerhoutii* is untested in our garden. It was too small in 2004-2005 to be evaluated for wind resistance. Our palm does not mind occasional flooding and seems to like our sandy soil. I've never noticed any micro nutritional deficiencies on our specimen. Our specimen was planted in



Arenga westerhoutii
in the Jeff Searle garden,
Southwest Ranches, Florida.

the middle of a banana grove, so that it was shaded at first and then grew into the full sun. I'll bet it would also grow well in full sun at a early age.

On your next trip to Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden check out the specimen planted by the Science Village/Butterfly House. You may find this a must have palm like I did. It's well suited for growing in coastal areas of Palm Beach County.

(All photos for this article were contributed by Charlie Beck.)



Arenga Westerhoutii stem detail
in the Beck garden.



12 year old *Arenga westerhoutii*
growing in the Beck Garden.



Arenga westerhoutii
emergent leaf underside
in the Beck garden.