

**GROWING
FEATURED THIS MONTH: *Attalea butyracea*
IN PALM BEACH COUNTY**

Submitted by Charlie Beck



16 year old *Attalea butyracea*
in Beck Garden



Attalea butyracea at Rio Palenque
Science Center in Ecuador



Attalea butyracea in fruit
in the Beck Garden
with distinctive coarse fiber

Attalea butyracea is a very large, solitary, pinnate palm with a wide distribution throughout Central and South America as well as Trinidad and Tobago. Its northern limit is Mexico and its southern limit is Bolivia. Its entire range is located within the tropics. *A. butyracea* is usually found at elevations below 1000'. Typical habitat is wet or seasonally wet forest or river margins. It can also be found in open savannas.



Attalea sp. make statement lining Beck driveway

Stems can grow 70' tall and measure more than 2' in diameter. Fronds can measure up to 45' long including the length of the sheath (leaf base). Fronds are upright and resemble a shuttlecock. Leaflets spread in a single plane. Petioles are either very short or absent. The most distinguishing feature of this palm is that it's the only tall *Attalea* species which has persistent, stiff, coarse fibers along the petiole margins. Once you recognize these 8-16" long fibers, it's easy to identify this species.

Attalea butyracea is a monoecious palm with inflorescences which may have entirely male or female flowers, or have both male and female flowers on a single inflorescence. The woody, peduncular bract measures 6-11' long and is deeply grooved. Fruit can be orange, yellow or brown, and contains 1-3 seeds.

In 1995 *Maximiliana*, *Sheelea*, and *Orbignya* were lumped into the genus *Attalea*. The previous four genera were distinguished by the shape of the male

flowers. *Attalea butyracea* was previously known as *Sheelea butyracea*. *A. butyracea* along with all palms previously classified as *Sheelea* have male flowers with cylindrical petals. When keying an *Attalea species*, male flower type is a helpful feature for identification.

In 1996 we participated in the International Palm Society post biennial tour of Ecuador. Although we saw little primary forest left in Ecuador, we did tour Rio Palenque Science Center which encompassed a large area of primary forest in all of its glory. This science center was owned by Cal Dodson, renowned orchid authority and former Executive Director of the Marie Selby Botanical Garden in Sarasota, Fl. We saw magnificent examples of *A. butyracea* along with many other palms and cycads growing in this forest. I roughly measured a fallen frond of *A. butyracea* and it exceeded 45' in length. I've included a photo of one of these palms from this trip.

In 1994 we planted seven palms labeled *Sheelea sp* along our driveway. This driveway is covered with several layers of pea gravel and is highly alkaline. Two of these palms turned out to be *Attalea butyracea*. We added a third *A. butyracea* 5 years later planted in an area away from the alkaline driveway. Although the palms lining the driveway grew well, the palm planted in our native sandy soil seems happier. These palms grow quite well at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden (FTBG) so they are quite adaptable to different soil types. These palms also do not mind periodic inundation.

Our 21 year old palms have grown 22' tall, measured to the top of the growing point. Our 16 year old specimen is 20' tall. Stems measure almost 2 ½' in diameter. With recommended fertilization and regular irrigation these palms reward you with rapid growth. *A. butyracea* has few rivals for announcing an entry or lining a driveway.

These are massive palms with heavy fronds, even when dried. The fronds tend to crush under plantings when they fall. Even the cut leaf bases are incredibly heavy. It won't be long before our palm fronds will be unreachable without the use of a stepladder and a 21' pole saw. These are not self-cleaning palms. Eventually the dried leaves do fall on their own after persisting for a few months. The old inflorescences also tend to persist for quite a while.

Our specimen planted in native sand has never shown any nutritional deficiencies, but the ones in alkaline soil have shown occasional evidence of boron deficiency. Frizzled leaflets midway along the rachis is an indication of boron deficiency. It's not a chronic problem.

All of our *Attalea* species showed no cold damage after the record cold winters of 2009 and 2010. The palms at FTBG also survived the two nights of 27 degree temperature during the Christmas Freeze of 1989. There was a tall *Attalea sp* located on Haverhill Rd just south of 45th Street in West Palm Beach which also survived the winter of 1989.

A. butyracea is available from local palm vendors. If you have the space for this magnificent palm give it a try. It will certainly attract a lot of attention.



Attalea butyracea with grooved bract growing in the Beck Garden