

GROWING *Coccothrinax crinita* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck



Coccothrinax crinita subspecies *crinita* with long, pendulous fibers (Old Man Palm) growing in the Beck garden.

(Photo by Charlie Beck)

Coccothrinax crinita is a solitary, medium-sized, palmate palm. Maximum height is reported to be 30 feet but the tallest specimens at Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden range to 20 feet. The most distinguishing feature of this palm is the closely woven, pendulous fibers which cover the stem. Its common name is “old man palm” due to the shaggy beard. These fibers persist for many years even though with great age the lower fibers may release from the stem. There are two subspecies: *crinita* is the palm with long distinctive fibers and is native to western Cuba and *brevicrinis* has much shorter fibers and is found in central Cuba.

Coccothrinax crinita is reported to be rare in Cuba, persisting only in cleared fields and pastures where they do not reproduce. Historical habitat ranges from sea level to 1,000 feet. It is reported that *C. crinita* grows in two distinct habitats. One habitat is low lying seasonally flooded savannas and the other is hilly areas on serpentine soils.

Coccothrinax crinita is not rare in South Florida botanical gardens. Fairchild has dozens of 50+ year old specimens displayed. Even Mounts Botanical Garden had *C. crinita* growing in their palm garden. Well grown specimens of *C. crinita* are not as common in private gardens. If you read the description of this palm’s native habitat you would think it was perfectly suited for growing in Palm Beach County. Seasonally flooded savannas in Cuba sounds a lot like our native pine flatwood habitat here in Palm Beach County. Our garden occasionally floods so I thought it was a good match for this palm’s native habitat. All of the *C. crinita* I planted quickly succumbed. Next I tried planting *C. crinita* on mounds of native sand. These palms also declined and died. In 1999, we brought truck loads of fill to establish a 3 foot high grade for building our house. Much of this fill was shell rock because it packed better than sand. *C. crinita* loves growing in this area. Our oldest specimen grew 9 ½ feet tall (overall) in 12 years. It is very healthy. If you want to grow this palm in your garden, I recommend mounding the soil with a 50/50 mix of our native sand and pea gravel. I’ve done this with some alkaline loving plants with success and I think *C. crinita* would thrive in this mix. Another idea would be to plant a *C. crinita* in a hollowed out hole in a block of shell rock. Years ago a vendor at a Fairchild palm

sale displayed healthy *C. crinita* grown in this manner. Of course you would need heavy equipment to place this shell rock block in your garden but these palms will thrive planted this way. Coral Castle, a tourist attraction in Homestead, had *C. crinita* and *C. argentata* specimens growing on the castle walls and they looked very healthy.

There is much genetic diversity within a palm species. I have seen *C. crinita* growing in private gardens without any soil amendment but mounding with a pea gravel/sand mixture will probably improve your success and growth rate of this desirable palm.



Coccothrinax crinita subspecies
brevicrinis with short fibers on the
stem.

(Photo by Charlie Beck)