

GROWING *Copernicia gigas* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Copernicia gigas is not widely planted in South Florida. For years I knew it was one of the three large *Copernicia* species from Cuba but I was not aware of what distinguished it from *C. baileyana* and *C. fallaensis*. Actually I wasn't familiar with *C. fallaensis* either until Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden (FTBG) started planting them near the Rare Plant House about 15-20 years ago. Between 1990 and 1996, some of our Society members traveled to Cuba and brought back photos of these fabulous palms. Seed sources were established and Holton Nursery and Caribbean Palms Nursery began offering these palms for sale.

I planted my first *C. gigas* in 2000. I thought it was worth a try even though I never actually saw a mature specimen in person. Well, in 13 years my first *C. gigas* has grown into a beautiful specimen which is 15' tall in overall height and measures a 20' diameter footprint. Even though a stem has not yet formed I can tell it will rival *C. baileyana* in girth. It is a fabulous palm and I think every garden should have at least one each of *C. gigas*, *C. baileyana* and *C. fallaensis*.

As we know, *C. gigas* is endemic to Cuba. It grows at low elevations in woodlands and pastures and is especially abundant adjacent to mangrove swamps. Dale Holton has reported that these palms grow in rice fields which are seasonally flooded. Like all *Copernicia* species, the leaves are truly palmate, not costapalmate like *Sabal sp.* The petiole is edged with sharp spines which may be in irregular patterns. Reference books state that *C. gigas* is distinct from other Cuban species and that it is more closely related to the South American *C. tectorum* and *C. brittonorum* and the palms from Hispaniola, *C. ekmanii* and *C. berteriana*. *C. gigas* is easily distinguished from other Cuban species by the wedge shaped leaves. Once you recognize this different leaf shape it is easy to pick out *C. gigas*. Other *Copernicia* species have rounded leaves except *C. rigida* which has wedge shaped leaves but also has very short petioles. See page 5 for comparison of leaf shapes. Of course we know *Copernicia* species readily hybridize. One of the named hybrids is a cross between *C. gigas* and *C. rigida*. It's named *C. vesperilionum* and it also has wedge shaped leaves. The leaves of *C. gigas* may be coated with a light to moderate layer of wax. This waxy coat might give a silvery sheen to the leaves but not as silver as some *C. fallaensis*. When young, the leaves may be very upright and might look similar to a very large *C. rigida* with very long petioles. As the palm matures it changes to a full, rounded crown of leaves. Inflorescences can measure up to 10' long. Stems can measure 1.7' in diameter and grow 65' tall. In Cuba the leaves are used for roof thatching and stems have been hollowed out for canoes. It has been reported that bats readily roost in the skirt of old fronds.

At a recent visit to FTBG, I discovered a huge *C. gigas*. Even though the accession tag indicated a 2000 date of acquisition, I had never noticed it before. This palm was inspiration for its selection as "Palm of the Month." I have to admit Fairchild's plant was larger than our specimen. I'm sure as people discover this palm at FTBG, it will be highly sought after. If you visit FTBG, the *C. gigas* is located in the lowlands not far from the pineland restoration. Don't miss it.



14 year old *Copernicia gigas* at FTBG



14 year old *Copernicia gigas* in the Beck garden



Copernicia glabrescens
at FTBG



Copernicia hospita
at FTBG



Copernicia berteriana
at FTBG



Copernicia ekmanii
at FTBG

