

## **GROWING *Itaya amicornum* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY**

*Submitted by Charlie Beck*

*Itaya amicornum* is native to restricted areas of Columbia, Peru, and Brazil. It grows in wet areas along rivers and streams, and also grows away from water courses at elevations up to 1000 feet. This is a tropical rainforest palm which was discovered and named in 1972. This palm is critically endangered due to land clearing.

*Itaya amicornum* is a solitary, palmate palm. Its leaves resemble large pinwheels similar to those of a large *Licuala peltata* although the petioles are unarmed. The leaf undersides are silvery gray or white. There is only one species identified in the genus *Itaya*. This palm is most closely related to *Chelyocarpus* but can be easily distinguished by its split petiole bases similar to palms in the genus *Thrinax*. *Itaya amicornum* is a monoecious palm with showy white, hermaphroditic flowers. In habitat these palms top out at 15' tall on stems which measure 3-4" in diameter. Six foot diameter leaves are held on 7-8' long petioles.

More than 20 years ago I was shopping for palms at a South Florida Palm Society Sale located at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden. I was there at the sale opening early Saturday morning. I was with all of the other palm enthusiasts, running from booth to booth trying to locate the rarest of rare palms. I overheard two of the vendors talking about someone was selling a small *Itaya amicornum* for \$350. At that time I didn't know this palm, nor was I willing to pay \$350 for such a small specimen. I did remember the name and how highly revered this palm was. Flash forward to 2000. Dale Holton had obtained *Itaya amicornum* seeds and was growing this rare palm at his nursery. Dale shared one of his seedlings with me. I planted this seedling in 2001 in heavy shade in an area prone to flooding after repeated heavy rains. This specimen has flourished in these conditions and in 2010 I planted another specimen which has also grown at a healthy rate. The oldest specimen is 4.5' in overall height and the leaves measure 4' across.

Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden (FTBG) has a magnificent *Itaya amicornum* growing in their heated "Windows to the Tropics" greenhouse. This specimen is 25 years old. FTBG started planting out *Itaya* palms outside in the rainforest area in 1995. These palms seem to like growing in Palm Beach County sugar sand better than the rocky, alkaline soil of Dade County. The palms in our garden have definitely outgrown their cousins at FTBG. Our 13 year old plant is considerably larger than any of the 19 year old plants at FTBG. Obviously these palms are not sensitive to our considerably colder winter temperatures up here in Palm Beach County. I was actually surprised that these palms could be grown here in Palm Beach County considering the tropical areas where they are native. Many of the palms which grow with *Itaya amicornum* in habitat are too cold sensitive to grow locally. The reference books say that cultivation is restricted to zones 11 and 10b. Our specimen plants showed no ill effects to the record cold winters of 2009 and 2010. Dale Holton tells me that his plants also survived those winters at his garden located 8 miles from the ocean.

As you can see from the photos *Itaya amicornum* is an impressive palm. The huge pinwheel leaves with silver undersides would grace any garden. Even though I've never personally seen this palm grown in full sun, it is reported to be sun tolerant when mature. There are photos on the internet which show this palm growing without canopy at Nong Nooch Garden in Thailand. This is not a common palm readily available at our palm and cycad sales. I do know that our sponsor Holton Nursery will offer a single specimen of *Itaya amicornum* for sale at our upcoming Spring Palm and Cycad Sale at the Mount's Garden. He has a supply of seedlings which will be available in the future.



*Itaya amicornum*, 25 years old at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden  
grown in heated "Windows to the Tropics" greenhouse





*Itaya amicornum*, 19 years old  
at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden



*Itaya amicornum*, 19 years old  
at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden



*Itaya amicornum*, 13 years old  
in the Beck Garden



*Itaya amicornum*, 4 years old  
in the Beck Garden