

GROWING *Aiphanes minima* IN PALM BEACH COUNTY

Submitted by Charlie Beck

Aiphanes minima is a solitary, medium size, pinnate palm. Eight inch diameter stems can grow 50' tall in habitat, but would take decades of growth to reach half that height in Palm Beach County. *A. minima* is native to the Caribbean Islands. Its distribution ranges from Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico in the north to Grenada in the south. Previously, this palm had distinct species names on many of islands. *A. acanthophylla*, *A. vincentiana*, *A. luciana*, and *A. erosa* were all lumped into *Aiphanes minima*.

Native habitat varies widely throughout its range. It can be found on dry limestone soil at high elevations or in wet locations at low elevations in volcanic soil. It grows in full sun or in heavy shade. It's quite an adaptable palm. Habitat, annual rainfall ranges between 40 and 80", which is similar to what we receive in Palm Beach County.

Aiphanes minima has an exotic appearance which makes it stand out in the palm garden. The stems are covered in long, flat, jet black spines. Even the leaves are spiny on both sides. The fronds are bright, emerald green and have wide, regularly arranged leaflets held in a single plane. Fronds measure 6-8' in length. The leaf tips have a distinctive, jagged shape. *Aiphanes* is the only spiny American palm genus with jagged leaf tips, except for a single species of *Bactris*.

Being monocious, a single palm can produce fruit. Ripe fruit is bright red. Seeds readily germinate but not to the extent of being weedy. Fronds are self-cleaning and are light enough to fall without damaging under plantings.

We have ten *A. minima* planted in our garden. All but one specimen were purchased with species names other than *Aiphanes minima*. Other than the former *A. vincentiana* being a smaller scale in all respects, the other palms look similar. We planted 6 specimens in a grouping which formed a mini-canopy that is particularly attractive to gaze upon.

Our oldest specimens are 23 years old. Those stems measure 17' tall. Twelve year old specimens are 11' tall, so growth does slow as the palm ages. This is what makes them suitable for planting on a standard sized lot with a one story house. They don't take up much space and they don't grow too tall. The only warning is don't ever mistakenly grab the spiny stem. The spines will penetrate even, leather gloves.

With recommended fertilization and regular irrigation, *A. minima* has been trouble free in our garden. I've never noticed a nutritional deficiency. Periodic inundation after repeated heavy rain hasn't caused a problem either. All of our *A. minima* survived the record cold winters of 2009 & 2010, but they did resent the repeated low temperatures. With recent warming trends *A. minima* should be fine when planted in eastern Palm Beach County.

Spiny stems and emerald green fronds with wide jagged leaf tips make this a very distinctive palm. Its manageable scale is also great feature. I highly recommend this beautiful palm for your palm collection.



Aiphanes minima jagged leaf lips



Aiphanes minima in the Beck Garden
12 year old single specimen (left above)
12 year old grouping (upper right & lower left)
Infructescence with red fruit (lower middle)
Seedling with spiny leaflets (lower right)

