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Coontie Propagation and Production©

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INTRODUCTION

The coontie, *Zamia pumila* L., syn. *Z. floridana*, is a cycad native to most counties in peninsular Florida and three counties in southeast Georgia. It is the only *Zamia* that is native to the United States, and is a larval food source for the Florida Atala butterfly, *Eumaeus atala*. Coontie has also been historically utilized as a human food source. The name 'coontie' is thought to come from a Native American word meaning "flour root." Another common name for this plant is "arrow root," and during the early 20th Century, it was widely harvested and processed into starch in factories all over South Florida.

In modern times, coontie are rarely consumed but rather produced for their value as a landscape plants. The potential planting range for the coontie is USDA Hardiness Zones 8b–11, encompassing the Gulf Coast and much of the West Coast, as well as the most significant population centers of Texas and Arizona. Coontie are best adapted to partial shade, but do well in full sun. In Florida, they are frequently used in low-maintenance landscape situations including urban highway medians. Coontie do best in soils with moderate to good drainage. Soil pH is not usually a limiting factor, and coontie is considered to be salt tolerant. The plant stores carbohydrates in a caudex which allows it to survive relatively long periods without water. The caudex also makes it possible to sell bare-root plants, which can be a great advantage when shipping long distances.

There are at least two distinct plant forms: (1) A thin-leaf form that is primarily found growing in sandy soils on the West Coast of Florida and in far south Florida, and (2) A wide-leaf form that is found in oak and pine hammocks in the northeastern part of Florida, west to Alachua County. Both forms have survived occasional salt water inundation. The wide-leaf form is generally considered to be more desirable for ornamental use, but the thin-leaf form is sometimes thought to be more tolerant of drought and low temperatures and might be best for certain landscape applications. The wide-leaf form is probably more shade tolerant and therefore best suited for interiorscapes and indoor/outdoor containers. All coontie are slow growing and long lived.