

Coontie may be the most primitive plant on earth.

Even before human beings existed on the earth, coontie (*Zamia pumila*) was growing and reproducing on our planet. Called the “living fossil”, this cycad may well be the most primitive plant on earth. Fossils of the plant have been found on every continent and latitude. It was a dominant type of vegetation when dinosaurs were roaming the planet. Although many of its relatives from the cycadophyta division have become extinct, coontie is still around. Throughout history, coontie has been used by humans for food and medicinal purposes. Today it is still a useful, unique and beautiful plant.

The root of the plant has been used as a food source for centuries. The Seminoles named it and the term “coontie” actually means “flour root.” The Indians would cut up pieces of the root and pound them out into a powder. They would then place the powdery substance in water and let the starch sink to the bottom. The paste was taken and fermented and then dried to a powder. They used the starchy substance to make bread. When the Europeans came to Florida they also used the stems and roots for food.

Historically the root was also used to absorb poisons from wounds, but during the Seminole Wars, coontie was utilized by army surgeons for a pain and inflammation reliever. It was also used for intestinal and urinary problems and as a nutrient for infants.

At one time the coontie covered much of Florida’s landscape. But being a slow growing plant, it takes about 30 years to grow a 5 pound tuber. In the 1800’s, people began to process the coontie roots for starch. Some mills would process as much as 10 – 15 tons per day. Between the starch factories and development in Florida, the wild coontie plant was nearly wiped out.

Today, coontie is protected and collecting it from the wild is illegal. It is a member of the cycad family which is a group of seed plants that produce a large crown of compound leaves and a fairly thick trunk. They resemble palms and ferns but are not related to either. They grow very slowly, but once established they are tough, drought resistant and easy to maintain.

Coontie is known for being an excellent ground cover because it is an evergreen and it will add color and background to an area. In addition, cyanobacteria, also known as blue-green algae, are found in the root of the plant. This bacterium obtains its energy through photosynthesis and has the ability to fix nitrogen in aerobic conditions, thereby aiding the surrounding soil enabling nearby plants to thrive.

Coontie is also a butterfly plant. It is the larval food for the rare Florida Atala butterfly. In 1965 the Florida Atala butterfly was declared an endangered species. Many scientists believed the creature to be extinct. But when landscapers began planting coontie, the butterflies made a remarkable comeback. A colony of Atala caterpillars can eat every leaf of the female coontie and being an obligate organism, it cannot survive without the plant. For butterfly gardeners, the coontie plant is a unique and welcome addition to other larval host plants.

Coontie is dioecious, having male and female plants. The male cones the plant produces are cylindrical and grow to about 3 – 6 inches and are often clustered. The female cones are

elongate-ovoid and grow to about 2 - 6 inches long. Pollination is usually performed by the belid weevil. The cones emerge from the ground in the late winter. Males produce pollen that fertilizes the female cones that mature in autumn when the 1 inch red seeds are released. Birds and other animals then transport the seeds to other areas.

Coontie does best when planted in shady gardens. It is a clumping plant which can grow to heights of 3 feet and spread up to 6 feet. It makes a good transition plant near other larger plants. It can handle full sun, but the leaves won't be as lush and it will tend to produce more cones and seeds. Coontie is also an excellent plant for pots and indoor décor. Keep in mind that they grow rather slowly but they don't require much maintenance.

Propagation from seed is the common method, however since coontie is such a slow grower and the seeds are poisonous, it may be best to buy the potted plant from a local nursery.

Many cycads are dwindling in numbers and may risk extinction because of collection from their natural habitat by poachers. By planting coontie, the gardener will not only be rewarded by the unique primitive look of the plant in the landscape, but know that there is one more cycad in the world that is protected.

Coontie will be available at the Air potato exchange day on January 10, 2009. Watch for articles on upcoming workshops.