

Coontie—an Excellent Groundcover Plant



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July 29, 2004

On a recent visit to MacClay State Gardens, I was impressed with the use they had made of Coontie (*Zamia pumila*). Under tall, spreading live oaks, it had been used as a groundcover. Many of them were grouped together, and I thought, “Wow! That’s beautiful!” Immediately I was reminded that I need a several acre spread to accommodate all of the plants that I want to grow.

Coontie is an evergreen, palmlike perennial shrub that has fine textured, leathery, fernlike foliage. Blooms appear in spring followed by elongated fruit (cones) 3-6 inches long. Seeds are covered with red or orange-red flesh. Male and female reproductive parts are on separate plants.

It is the food for the larval stage of the butterfly, atala hairstreak, and large populations sometimes defoliate large plantings. Like most larval plant foods, it recovers and grows new foliage. We in this area don’t need to worry about that, because atalas don’t live this far north. Ability to pull its stem into the earth keeps the plants safe from fire and predation by herbivores. Large storage roots yield an edible starch, a characteristic that earned it the name Seminole bread.

Coontie has been in existence for centuries. It is actually a cycad, a group of plants that were once the dominant vegetation on earth. It adapts to a wide range of soil from alkaline to acidic; loam or sand. Plants should be spaced 36 to 60 inches apart for groundcover use.

Performance is best in some shade. Salt tolerance allows it to be planted near, but not directly on the beach. It is perfect for woodland and shady gardens and is very tolerant of drought.

Though pests are usually not a problem, Florida red scale, which may be fatal, must be controlled. Other problems include sooty mold, mealy bugs, and scale. Plants that are too large or that are infested with scale may be cut back to the ground to produce new foliage. Or you could use a systemic insecticide.

Coontie is difficult to transplant because of long tap roots, so transplanting and division are rarely successful. Plants should never be removed from the wild. Seedlings sometimes come up around the mother plant. Seeds

Coontie

germinate well but seedlings are very slow growing. Sow immediately after harvest.

Zamia pumila has many synonyms, such as *Zamia floridana*, *Z. angustifolia*, *Z. integrifolia*, and about 42 others. There appears to be a wide-leafed form and a narrow-leafed form. A less hardy relative, the cardboard palm (*Zamia furfuracea*), is also available. The popular, though not native, sago palm (*Cycas revoluta*) is another member of the cycad family that grows well in our area.

Coontie is effective in mass plantings or may be used as a border or accent. It is also quite happy in pots, urns, or other containers either indoors or outdoors. I'm determined to find a place in my landscape for a few of these beautiful landscape plants. I wonder what I'll have to dig up in order to have them. Maybe some azaleas?

At a Glance

Zamia pumila

Say: ZAM-ee-uh pu-MIL-uh

Family: Zamiaceae (Cycad family)

Other names: Coontie, Florida Arrowroot, Seminole Bread

Origin: Native to Florida, West Indies, Middle and South America

Zones: 8B-11

Light: part shade, part sun

Water Use Zone: low

Size: 2-4 feet tall, 3-5 feet spread

Soil: alkaline to acid; loam or sand

Salt tolerance: High