



Pategai on Plants

“The love of dirt is among the earliest of passions, as it is the latest.”
— Charles Dudley Warner

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A Standout Cycad

When we travel and visit tropical conservatories in botanical gardens, we always overhear visitors “ooh” and “ah” over the obligatory cycads. We try not to look too smug since we live year-round with two zamias and three dioons. (They even moved with us two years ago.) One is a *Dioon edule* (Family: Zamiaceae), which is hardy in Zones 8 to 11.

Chestnut dioon, one of the cold-hardest cycads, is native to dry, exposed hillsides of Mexico and is also called Mexican fern palm. Its pinnate fronds with numerous leaflets reach 3 to 5 feet in length. They emerge soft and rubbery but quickly turn stiff and leathery with needle-sharp tips. Ouch! This very slow grower enjoys full sun to partial shade with a rich, well-drained soil. Water well in the summer but apply sparingly in the winter. The short, thick, multiple trunks develop very slowly, and a mature plant may reach 6 feet in height with a 5- to 8-foot spread.

If the foliage isn’t striking enough, wait for the cones on this primitive, dioecious subtropical to appear. Male cones are cylindrical and smaller than the wooly female cones. In Mexico, the edible seeds are ground and used to make tortillas. The chestnut dioon may encounter scale, fungal leaf spot, and crown and root rot. One time the foliage on our plant totally browned, and the bare trunk vegetated in a clay pot for a whole year without any growth — until I yanked it to toss it. When I discovered live roots and nestled it back into its clay pot, it popped out new fronds in a week. It worked its magic on us, and now we were “oohing” and “ahing.”

Find your cold-hardy tropical cycads at Aoki Sago Nursery of Plant City, FL (813-752-1144 or www.emperorsago.com) and Living Fossil Nursery of Leesburg, FL (352-669-7795). — SGP



Dioon edule



An ancient
Dioon edule

Pineapple Guava Makes The Grade

Acca sellowiana, formerly *Feijoa sellowiana* (Family: Myrtaceae), earned its place as a Florida Plant of the Year in 2000 due to its versatility and character. Known as pineapple guava, the plant is native to southern Brazil and northern Argentina. *A. sellowiana* is hardy from Zone 8 through 11. Reaching a height of about 8 feet with an 8-foot spread, it may be used as a tree-form shrub, clipped hedge, espalier, or specimen.

Pineapple guava’s evergreen foliage is semiglossy gray-green on top and downy silver-gray beneath. It often finds its way into arrangements. The showy, fragrant flowers sport edible, fleshy, white petals with a purple tint and dark red stamens. The slightly pineapple-flavored green fruits with a reddish tinge are also edible and may be eaten raw or made into jelly.

This drought-tolerant and slightly salt-tolerant plant takes full sun to partial shade, prefers well-drained soil, and may suffer from scale and fungal leaf spot.

A. sellowiana is grown in a variety of container sizes and may be found at Beckel Landscape Nursery of Sanford, FL (407-323-6555), Tropic Traditions of Gainesville, FL (888-586-5875), or Skinner Nurseries of Bunnell, FL (888-884-4344 or www.skinner@skinnernurseries.com). — KGP



Acca sellowiana



Edible petals of
Acca sellowiana

Photos by Stephen G. Pategas

Kristin and Stephen are co-owners of Hortus Oasis in Winter Park, FL, providing garden design and garden photography services. Visit them at www.hortusoasis.com and contact them at garden@hortusoasis.com.