PLANT FACT SHEET

Areca catechu L.

GENUS *Areca* **FAMILY** Arecaceae

COMMON NAMES Betel nut, Areca nut

EDIBLE PARTS AND USES

Edible parts: Nuts, Cabbage, Palm heart, Male flowers

The nut is chewed (with lime and betel pepper) as a masticatory.
The heart of the palm is edible and eaten raw or cooked. It is also used for pickles.
The young fruit are used to tenderise meat.
CAUTION Chewing betel nut is associated with cancer of the mouth and throat. It contains alkaloids and tannins.

DESCRIPTION

A straight slender palm up to 30 m tall. The leaves can spread 5 m across. The trunk is slender and erect. The trunk has rings around it and is about 10 to 15 cm across. The fronds or leaves are divided into leaflets along a stalk. The leaves are a dark green and 1.5 m long with leaf divisions about 25 cm long. The leaves arch over. The ends of the leaflets have irregularly placed teeth. A much branched flower cluster develops below the sheath. This can be 60 cm long with pale yellow flowers. The female flower occurs on its own at the base surrounded by small, white, sweet smelling male flowers. The fruit are egg shaped and up to 7 cm long. They change from green to red or yellow as they ripen.

HABITAT

A tropical plant. They occur from sea level up to 900 m altitude in the tropics. It does best in rich moist soils in a shady, sheltered position. It needs soils of reasonable depth for good production. Plants are drought and frost tender. The seed needs to be sown when temperatures are 24-27°C. Plants can tolerate temperatures down to a minimum of 13-15°C. Found in settled areas throughout the Philippines. Also found in virgin forest in Palawan. It grows in Nepal up to 400 m altitude. In Cairns Botanical Gardens including var. alba. It suits hardiness zones 11-12. In Yunnan.

PRODUCTION

Cultivation

Trees are grown from seed. The seedlings are transplanted at 1-2 years of age. A spacing of 3 m between plants is the best spacing. Bananas can be used to provide temporary shade while betel nut palms get established. Holes 50 cm across and deep need to be dug. The seedlings should be planted 20 cm below ground level. As emerging prop roots develop the hole should be filled in.

Harvesting and Seed Production

The palm commences bearing fruit after about 7 years. The fruit take 6-8 months to ripen. Trees can continue fruiting for 30-60 years.

NOTES

Seeds contain the alkaloid arecolaine and others alkaloids. There are 60 Areca species. They are tropical. The nuts can contain significant fluoride which is ingested while chewing.

PICTURES



Credit: Food Plants International (Bruce French)



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