

## COONTIE – A CYCAD

**The most beautiful, fruitful, productive, interesting, and educational VWGC Butterfly Gardens attract loads of insects, birds, butterflies -- and visitors.**

Each of the 11 gardens grow Coontie, which is a native Floridan that is very special. It is the only cycad native to Florida. Cycads are considered among the most ancient of all plants and are often referred to as living fossils. The Coontie is related to those that existed well before the dinosaurs.

Although Coontie is often mistakenly identified as a fern or a palm, like all cycads, it doesn't produce any flowers or fruits. Instead, it reproduces by producing seeds in seed cones and pollen in pollen cones. The life cycle is similar to pine trees.

When there were few people and a lot of Coontie in Florida, this was a major staple (Indian arrow root) in the local Seminole's diet. Clearly this was not a plant eaten for the fun of it, as it required processing that included peeling, washing, grating, leaching, and fermenting. But it became a commercial product for businessmen in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. One mill in Miami produced up to 15 tons a day.

Coontie production created the city where Ft. Lauderdale is today. It is the only place the brilliant Alata butterfly, thought extinct by 1965, lays its eggs. Coontie is fertilized mostly by two beetles and the seeds are a source of food for mockingbirds, blue jays, and small mammals.

Harvesting and urban sprawl brought the Coontie to the edge of disappearing.