

Areca catechu

Arecaceae (Palmae)

South East Asia

COMMON NAMES: **English:** Betel nut, Areca palm, Areca nut.

DESCRIPTION: A slender, erect palm to 30 m tall and 25–40 cm in diameter. Crown about 2.5 m in diameter. **TRUNK:** Straight, green when young, later becoming greyish brown, with rings from leaf scars. **LEAVES:** 8–12 leaves, up to 2 m long. Each leaf divided, with 30–50 leaflets, each 30–70 cm long and 3–7 cm wide, with 3 or more folds. **FLOWERS:** A single-branched bunch of flowers from the trunk under the crown. Male flowers numerous, small, borne above female flowers. Female flowers on thickened base of branches, 1.2–2 cm long, green and creamy white. **FRUIT:** Oval or almost round, to 10 cm long and 5 cm wide, variable in shape, yellow to orange when ripe, 50–400 fruits on one stand.

ECOLOGY: Origin unclear, but probably in Indonesia. Now also found in most parts of South East Asia and in many other tropical regions, including Tanzania and Kenya. Grows from sea level to about 900 m, particularly in coastal climates where evenly distributed annual rainfall of 1,500–5,000 mm ensures ample soil moisture throughout the year. In Kenya, planted but also naturalized in Coast Province, especially around Lamu and the lower Tana River area. Riverine in very dry areas. Agroclimatic Zones III–V.

USES: Fruit (chewed as a stimulant), tannin (fruit), red dye (fruit), medicine (chewing fruit acts as a vermifuge and strengthens gums), soil improvement.

PROPAGATION: Seedlings, direct sowing at site.

SEED: About 60 seeds per kg.

treatment: Nuts should be allowed to ripen fully on the tree. Drying of seeds for 1–2 days before sowing improves germination.

MANAGEMENT: Young seedlings need protection from sunlight. Areca nut is sensitive to drought.

REMARKS: Grown in Kenya mainly for aesthetic and landscaping purposes. In Asia, cut slices of the seed mixed with lime and wrapped in leaves of *Piper betle* (Betel pepper) are chewed as a stimulating masticatory. It turns saliva, lips, tongue and teeth red or black. The skin of the fruit of betel nut is edible.

FURTHER READING: <http://www.worldagroforestrycentre.org/Sites/TreeDBS/AFT/AFT.htm>; Beentje, 1994; Jensen, 1999; Lötschert and Beese, 1983.

