



Florida Cooperative Extension Service

## Planting a Palm Tree<sup>1</sup>

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Palms are one of the most important components of the Florida landscape. They present a tropical look that no other material can provide. Fortunately many palms are well adapted to the soils in Florida and require a minimum of care to establish and maintain properly. The initial care you give your palm when transplanting it often determines the future success of the plant in the landscape.

### SITE SELECTION AND PREPARATION

Several factors should be considered before selecting the planting site for a palm. If you have a specific type of palm in mind, be sure to consider how the plant will fit in the landscape in 10-15 years, when it reaches maturity. Are there overhead utility wires, buried cables, or irrigation lines? Would the palm pose a hazard during a hurricane? Is the sun exposure full, partial, or shade? As a general landscaping rule, small lots with one story houses look best with medium sized or smaller palms. Large palms such as royals, washingtonias, and coconuts look best when planted in large areas or in the vicinity of larger buildings. Clusters of odd numbers of palms (1, 3, 5) are generally more aesthetically pleasing than even numbered groups, unless more than seven are being planted in one area.

Consideration should be made of the type of soil the palms will be planted in. Is it alkaline sand, coral rock, clay, marl, or another soil-type? By knowing the soil-type, it is often possible to predict certain nutrient

deficiencies and correct them preventively rather than after the problem shows up.

### PREPARING THE SOIL

For many years, it was felt necessary to amend poor soils with organic material. Current planting recommendations discourage the use of soil amendments (such as peat moss) mixed with the back fill. The ideal situation is to have the whole planting area rich in organic material; if the planting hole is filled with soil much better than that around it, the roots may never penetrate the surrounding poor soil.

It is much more important that you apply a heavy mulch around the trunk, using wood chips, cypress bark, lawn clippings, or other similar material. As this decomposes, it enriches the soil while also reducing the weed competition and reducing water consumption. Be sure to replace the mulch as it decomposes. Keep a small circle (several inches) around the trunk free of mulch.

### WATERING

Water the root ball of the plant with a hose as it is being planted. This will ensure that no air pockets are trapped in the soil and will establish a good union between the root ball and the existing soil. After planting, a small (2-3 inch high) soil "dam" encircling the plant will direct and concentrate future watering to the root ball of the palm. Watering for the first

1. This document is Fact Sheet ENH-46, a series of the Environmental Horticulture Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication date: March 1991.
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several months is critical. Never allow the soil to dry out completely. It is also important not to overwater. Overwatering not only encourages root diseases, but it also discourages the establishment of new roots in the surrounding soil.

### **TIME OF THE YEAR TO TRANSPLANT**

Palms can be transplanted at any time of the year although they establish themselves far more quickly and with fewer problems if they are set out in the spring and early summer. Palms do not grow as rapidly during the winter months and several experimental observations have shown that cold-damage is much more severe in palms that are not well established. The dry winter season also requires more irrigation to insure the survival of the newly planted palm.

### **FERTILIZER**

To establish a palm rapidly, a good fertilizer program is necessary. For the first year, a foliar micro-nutrient spray applied every three to four months and a slow release granular fertilizer with a 3—1—3 ratio of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium applied every four months will provide the optimum results. After the first year, only the granular fertilizer is required. A good fertilization program for all palms is detailed in the Extension publication "Palm Nutrition Guide" (SS-ORH-02).

### **OTHER FACTORS**

If you purchase a field-grown palm that has been "balled and burlapped" but is not to be planted out immediately, it is important to store the palm properly. Most palms can remain out of the ground for two to three days with no damage if they are kept in a shady area and the root ball is watered daily. Desiccation of the root ball will severely damage the palm and reduce its chances of proper establishment. When planting a "balled and burlapped" plant as opposed to a containerized one, it is necessary to remember that the plant is more likely to suffer from transplant shock since the root system has been severely reduced. Also, one should pay particular attention to the burlap surrounding the roots. If, after planting, a portion is exposed to the air it will act as a "wick" drying out the soil and stressing the roots. Complete coverage of the root ball and a heavy layer of mulch will alleviate this problem.

Many palms also suffer from being planted too deeply. This essentially suffocates the roots and invites root diseases. As a general rule, one should always plant a palm at the same depth as it was initially grown.

Many palms are ideally suited for Florida and provide much of the unique environment for which the state is known. Because of their relative ease of culture and minimal pest and disease problems, they should be prominently displayed in our landscape. By observing the recommendations of this fact sheet you can make palm trees an important part of your landscape.