



Ornamental Palms for North Florida¹

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Palms are a prominent part of south Florida's landscape and add a tropical image to this part of the state. Although most palms are not cold hardy and should be planted only in southern portions of the state, there are some that can be grown successfully in north Florida.

Palms for landscaping are available in many sizes and forms, varying from large majestic trees to small shrubs. Many palms have single trunks, but multiple-trunk forms can add interest to the landscape. Small palms with delicate foliage and multiple-trunk palms can be used for natural plantings. Palms with either feather (pinnate) or fan-shaped (palmate) leaves can be selected.

Selection and Use

Many palms are available for landscaping homes, parks, streets, and commercial buildings. Palms are used in the landscape as specimens, border plants, patio trees, and street plantings. Specimen plants used individually have a distinctive or majestic quality that attracts immediate interest. For use in border plantings, palms require dense foliage to screen or fill an area. Smaller species that are reasonably free of litter are excellent for patios. Large palms used for street plantings should be able to survive with little maintenance once established. Many palms can be grown indoors as well as outdoors.

Table 1 in this publication includes palms that are well adapted to north Florida. Selection should be based on the intended use and characteristics of the site. Palms selected for coastal sites need to have salt spray tolerance. Careful study of the list of palms and their characteristics will allow selection of the right palm for the landscape needs.

Lethal Yellowing

Increasing numbers of palm species are suspected of being susceptible to a disease called lethal yellowing (LY). The first occurrence of LY in Florida was reported in Key West, and it has since spread to many southern counties. Efforts continue to prevent the spread of LY into central and north Florida. Although LY has been especially devastating to the coconut palm, other palms have exhibited varying degrees of susceptibility to LY. A complete list of susceptible palms can be obtained by contacting your local County Extension Office. Some palms recommended in this publication are moderately susceptible and their susceptibility will be noted in the chart.

Planting

Palms should be planted and cared for properly to insure that they will be healthy and attractive. Palms may be planted during any season of the year, but the warm, rainy, summer months are best. Palms from nurseries are

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often in containers, and little loss or setback occurs when the soil ball remains intact during transplanting.

Follow the steps below when planting a palm:

- 1) Dig the hole wide enough to easily accept the root ball and provide at least several inches of new growth from the ball. It need only be deep enough to situate the palm at the same depth at which it previously grew.
- 2) The amending of backfill soil from the planting hole is not recommended.
- 3) Gently place the palm straight in the hole and fill around the ball with unamended soil. Water thoroughly to remove any air pockets.
- 4) Form a basin with soil at the periphery of the root ball to retain water during irrigation.
- 5) Mulch with 2-to 3-inch layer of organic material to buffer soil temperature, conserve moisture, and reduce weed competition.
- 6) Support large palms with braces to maintain stability during the first 6 to 8 months after planting. Nails should not be driven directly into a palm trunk.

- 7) Water daily for the first few weeks and frequently thereafter until palms are well established.
- 8) A light application of partially slow-release “palm special” fertilizer can be banded at the margin of the root ball 3 to 4 months after transplanting.

Fertilizing

Regular fertilization is necessary for best palm growth. Mature palms should receive a complete granular fertilizer formulated for palms (“palm special”) four times per year at a rate of 5 to 8 pounds each application. For palms under 8 feet tall, apply 2 to 5 pounds of fertilizer. Broadcast the fertilizer under the canopy of the palm but not up against the trunk where newly emerging roots may be injured.

Table 1. Selected Palms for North Florida

| Common Names <i>Scientific Names</i> | Type of Leaves | Height Range | Growth Habit | Adaptability | | How Palms Are Used | | | | | |
|--|--------------------|------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------|-------|----------|---------|
| | | | | Soil Type | Salt Tol. ¹ | Specimen | Borders or Base | Indoor | Patio | Roadside | Seaside |
| Broad-leaf Lady Palm, <i>Rhapis excelsa</i> | Fan-Shaped | 8-10' (2.4-3.0m) | Low-growing shrub type of clump palm. | Moist, semi-shaded areas best. | N | X | X | X | X | | |
| Remarks: Slow grower; excellent patio or container palm; plant in sites which offer protection from cold. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cabbage Palm, <i>Sabal palmetto</i> | Fan-Shaped | 30-60' (9.1-18.2m) | Erect tree; heavy trunk. | Very adaptable; wet to dry | H | X | X | | | X | X |
| Remarks: Florida's official state tree; very numerous; excellent native palm; transplants easily | | | | | | | | | | | |
| California Washington, <i>Washingtonia filifera</i> | Fan-Shaped | 50-60' (15.2-18.2m) | Tall, stiff, erect tree. | Well drained. | M | X | | | | X | |
| Remarks: Good for street plantings. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Canary Island Date Palm (LY) ² , <i>Phoenix canariensis</i> | Feather- shaped | 30-60' (9.1-18.2m) | Stocky, single massive trunk. | Grows best on well- drained site. | M | X | | | | X | |
| Remarks: Too large for residential plantings; often shows magnesium deficiency. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Chinese Fan-palm (LY), <i>Livistona chinensis</i> | Fan-Shaped | 30' (9.1m) | Heavy trunk. | Fairly adaptable. | M | X | | | X | X | |
| Remarks: Slow grower until trunk well formed; plant in sites which offer protection from cold. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Date Palm (LY), <i>Phoenix dactylifera</i> | Feather- Shaped | 30-40' (9.1-12.1m) | Tall, erect; gray-green leaves. | Well-drained. | M | X | | | | X | |
| Remarks: Too large for most lots; fruit seldom found in Florida. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Dwarf Palmetto, <i>Sabal minor</i> | Fan-Shaped | 3-6' (0.9-1.9m) | Stemless shrub. | Variable; best in moist sites. | H | | X | | | | X |
| Remarks: Seldom used; native palm with bluish color; difficult to transplant. | | | | | | | | | | | |

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| European Fan Palm, <i>Chamaerops humilis</i> | Fan-Shaped | 2-5' (0.6-1.5m) Rare 15' (4.5m) | Clump growing, dwarf. | Tolerates many kinds of soils. | H | X | X | X | X | | X |
| Remarks: Slow grower; excellent small palm for homes. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Hispaniolan Palmetto, <i>Sabal domingensis</i> | Fan-Shaped | 35-60' (10.6-18.2m) | Stout, heavy trunk; very large leaves. | Thrives on sandy soil. | H | X | | | | X | X |
| Remarks: Much larger and heavier than our cabbage palm; seldom available. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Mexican Washington, <i>Washingtonia robusta</i> | Fan-Shaped | 60-80' (18.2-24.2m) | Very tall erect palm. | Very adaptable. | M | X | | | | X | |
| Remarks: Leaves clothe the trunk; good for street plantings. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Needle Palm, <i>Rhapidophyllum hystrix</i> | Fan-Shaped | 3-5' (0.9-1.5m) (Rare 10') (3.0m) | Low-growing reclining trunk; clumps or single trunk. | Fertile, moist soils and shade. | M | X | X | | X | | |
| Remarks: Slow grower but excellent small native palm; very cold hardy; needles could be dangerous to small children. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Paurotis Palm, <i>Acoelorrhaphe wrightii</i> | Fan-Shaped | 30' (9.1m) | Bushy, dense, multitrunk cluster palm. | Fertile, moist soils. | M | X | X | | X | | |
| Remarks: Moderate to slow growth rate; plant in sites which offer protection from cold. | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Pindo Palm, <i>Butia capitata</i> | Feather- Shaped | 10-20' (3.0-6.1m) | Heavy trunk, low- growing; bluish- gray leaves. | Very adaptable. | M | X | X | | X | X | |
| Remarks: Slow grower; needs space to develop; most cold hardy of pinnate palms. | | | | | | | | | | | |

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| | | | | Soil Type | Salt Tol. ¹ | Specimen | Borders or Base | Indoor | Patio | Roadside | Seaside | |
| Puerto Rico Hat Palm, <i>Sabal causiarum</i> | Fan-Shaped | 30-40' (9.1-12.1m) | Very massive; huge leaves. | Grows well on sandy soils. | H | X | | | | | X | X |
| Remarks: Too large for most homesites. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Saw Palmetto, <i>Serenoa repens</i> | Fan-Shaped | 3-4' (0.9-1.2m) | Shrub; twisted, recumbent trunk; some upright types. | Extremely adaptable. | H | | X | X | X | | | X |
| Remarks: Excellent small native palm but very difficult to transplant. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Senegal Date Palm (LY), <i>Phoenix reclinata</i> | Feather-Shaped | 20-25' (6.1-7.6m) | Multiple trunk; clump palm. | Well-drained. | M | X | | | | | | |
| Remarks: Too large for many homes; plant in sites which offer protection from cold. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Wild Date Palm (LY), <i>Phoenix sylvestris</i> | Feather-Shaped | 60-80' (18.2-24.2m) | Base roots often exposed. | Variable. | M | X | | | | | X | |
| Remarks: Looks like Canary Islands Date palm; seldom available. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Windmill Palm (LY), <i>Trachycarpus fortunei</i> | Fan-Shaped | 5-10' (1.5-3.0m) (Rare-20') (6.1m) | Slender, erect, solitary trunk. | Very adaptable. | H | X | X | | X | | | X |
| Remarks: Very cold hardy; excellent palm. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ¹ Salt Spray Tolerance (Salt Tol.): H - Highly salt tolerant; may be used in exposed areas near shore line; M - Moderately; if near shore must be protected; L - Low, must be used in well-protected areas back from shore; N - No salt tolerance or salt tolerance unknown. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ² LY - Palms moderately susceptible to lethal yellowing. | | | | | | | | | | | | |