



Ornamental Palms for South Florida¹

Robert Black²

Palms are a dominant part of south Florida's landscape and add a tropical image to this part of the state. Adapted palms can be selected for most locations in Florida. Favorable climatic conditions make possible the successful outdoor culture of many different species.

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

Increasing numbers of palm species are suspected of being susceptible to a disease called lethal yellowing or lethal decline. Replacement of diseased or dead palms with other palm species will be necessary to maintain Florida's subtropical image. Palms recommended in this fact sheet are not presently known to be susceptible to lethal yellowing. Commonly grown palms that are susceptible include the common coconut palm, Christmas palm, windmill palm, hurricane palm, date palm, and fishtail palms. A complete list of susceptible palms can be obtained by contacting the nearest county Extension office.

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, hedges, patio trees, and street plantings. Specimen plants used individually have a distinctive or majestic quality that attracts immediate interest. For use in border or hedge 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 includes palms that are well adapted to south 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 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

-
1. This document is ENH-21 (which supersedes OH-21), one of a series of the Department of Environmental Horticulture, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Printed May 1988. Revised: June 1997. Please visit the FAIRS Website at <http://hammock.ifas.ufl.edu>.
 2. Robert Black, Extension Consumer Horticulturist, Department of Environmental Horticulture, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences is an equal opportunity/affirmative action employer authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without regard to race, color, sex, age, handicap, or national origin. For information on obtaining other extension publications, contact your county Cooperative Extension Service office. Florida Cooperative Extension Service / Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences / University of Florida / Christine Taylor Waddill, Dean

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 usually are 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 South 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 | Tropical Effect |
| LARGE PALMS | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Australian Fan Palm, <i>Livistona australis</i> | Fan-Shaped | 80' | Single-stemmed fairly hardy. | Moist, rich soil. | N | X | X | | | X | | X |
| Remarks: Similar to Chinese Fan Palm but taller and less cold hardy | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cabbage Palmetto, <i>Sabal palmetto</i> | Fan-Shaped | 80-90' | Erect, heavy tree, hardy | Very adaptable; wet to dry sites | H | X | X | | | X | X | X |
| Remarks: Florida's official state tree, excellent palm | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cuban Acrocomia, <i>Acrocomia armentalis</i> | Feather-shaped | 50' | Thorny, swollen trunk | Tolerates sandy soils of many types | M | X | | | | X | | X |
| Remarks: Occasionally seen in southern Florida | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Royal Palms, <i>Roystonea</i> spp. | Feather-shaped | 90- 100' | Erect, massive trunk | Moist, rich soils | H | X | | | | X | X | X |
| Remarks: Requires moisture, very stately; Florida, Caribbean, and Cuban Royals used | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Hispaniolan Palmetto, <i>Sabal umbraculifera</i> | Fan-Shaped (large) | 60' | Stout, heavy trunk; very large leaves. | Thrives on sandy soil. | H | X | | | | X | X | X |
| Remarks: Much larger and heavier than the cabbage palm. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Malayan Dwarf Coconut Palm, <i>Cocos nucifera</i> 'Malayan Dwarf' | Feather-shaped | 40-60' | Smooth, erect trunk | Tolerates many soil types | H | X | X | | | X | X | X |
| Remarks: Give landscape a tropical appearance; a beautiful palm | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Washington Palm, <i>Washingtonia</i> spp. | Fan-Shaped | 50-80' | Tall, erect, very hardy | Moist and dry soils | M | X | | | | X | X | X |
| Remarks: <i>Filifera</i> and <i>robusta</i> used most | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 1. Selected Palms for South Florida

| | | | | Adaptability | | How Palms Are Used | | | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------|-------|----------|---------|--------------------|
| Common Names <i>Scientific Names</i> | Type of Leaves | Height Range | Growth Habit | Soil Type | Salt Tol. ¹ | Specimen | Borders or Base | Indoor | Patio | Roadside | Seaside | Tropical Effect |
| MEDIUM PALMS | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cane Palm, <i>Chrysalidocarpus lutescens</i> | Feather- shaped | 20' | low-growing multiple trunks | Moist soil best | L | X | | X | X | | | X |
| Remarks: One of the most beautiful small clump palms | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Chinese Fan-palm (LY) ² , <i>Livistona chinensis</i> | Fan- Shaped | 30' | Heavy trunk. | Fairly adaptable. | N | X | | | X | X | | X |
| Remarks: Slow-growing | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Florida Silver Palm, <i>Coccothrinax argentata</i> | Fan- Shaped | 25' | Slender trunk | Variable | H | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Remarks: Beautiful small ornamental palm | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Gru-Gru, <i>Acrocomia totai</i> | Feather- shaped (prickly) | 45' | Thorny, straight trunk | Tolerates many kinds of soils | M | X | | | | X | | X |
| Remarks: Many thorns on the trunk | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| MacArthur Cluster Palm, <i>Ptychosperma macarthuri</i> | Feather- shaped | 25-30' | Slender, multiple trunks | Adaptable | M | X | X | X | X | | | X |
| Remarks: Attractive small cluster palm | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Puerto Rico Hat Palm, <i>Sabal causiarum</i> | Fan- Shaped | 40' | Very massive; huge leaves. | Grows well on sandy soils. | H | X | | | | X | X | X |
| Remarks: Too large for most homesites. | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 1. Selected Palms for South Florida

| | | | | Adaptability | | How Palms Are Used | | | | | | |
|--|--------------------|----------------------|--|---|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------|-------|----------|---------|--------------------|
| Common Names <i>Scientific Names</i> | Type of Leaves | Height Range | Growth Habit | Soil Type | Salt Tol. ¹ | Specimen | Borders or Base | Indoor | Patio | Roadside | Seaside | Tropical Effect |
| Queen Palm, <i>Arecastrum romanzoffianum</i> | Feather- shaped | 25' | Fast-growing | Well adapted | M | X | | X | X | X | | X |
| Remarks: A beautiful ornamental palm | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Saw Cabbage Palm, <i>Paurotis wrighti</i> (<i>Acoelorrhaphe wrighti</i>) | Fan- Shaped | 20-40' | Slender, multiple trunks | Moist to wet walls | H | X | X | | | | X | X |
| Remarks: Tender, needs moisture; very attractive | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Solitaire Palm, <i>Ptychosperma elegans</i> | Feather- shaped | 20' | Slender, single trunk | Adaptable | M | X | X | X | X | X | | X |
| Remarks: Tender, beautiful small palm. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| SMALL PALMS | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Butia Palm, <i>Butia</i> spp. | Feather- shape | 10-20' | Low-growing, heavy trunk; bluish-gray leaves | Very adaptable | M | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| Remarks: Slow-growing; needs space to develop. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Broad-leaf Lady Palm, <i>Rhapis excelsa</i> | Fan- Shaped | 8-10' | Low- growing shrub type of clump palm | Moist, semi- shaded areas best | N | X | X | X | X | | | X |
| Remarks: Slow-growing; excellent small palm for homes | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| European Fan Palm, <i>Chamaerops humilis</i> | Fan- Shaped | 2-5' (Rare 15') | Clump growing, dwarf. | Tolerates many kinds of soils. | H | X | X | X | X | | X | X |
| Remarks: Slow grower; excellent small palm for homes. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Jamaica Thatch Palm, <i>Thrinax parviflora</i> | Fan- Shaped | 10-30' (Rare 30') | Slender trunk | Tolerates poor growing conditions | H | X | | | X | | X | |
| Remarks: Beautiful ornamental palm | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 1. Selected Palms for South Florida

| | | | | Adaptability | | How Palms Are Used | | | | | | |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|---|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------|-------|----------|---------|--------------------|
| Common Names <i>Scientific Names</i> | Type of Leaves | Height Range | Growth Habit | Soil Type | Salt Tol. ¹ | Specimen | Borders or Base | Indoor | Patio | Roadside | Seaside | Tropical Effect |
| Needle Palm, <i>Rhapidophyllum hystrix</i> | Fan- Shaped | 2-3' (Rare 10') | Low-growing reclining trunk; clumps or single trunk. | Fertile, moist soils and shade. | M | X | X | | X | | | X |
| Remarks: Slow grower but excellent small native palm; very cold hardy; needles could be dangerous to small children. | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Saw Palmetto, <i>Serenoa repens</i> | Fan- Shaped | 3-4' | Shrub; twisted. recumbent trunks; some upright types. | Extremely adaptable. | H | | X | X | X | | X | X |
| Remarks: Excellent small palm but difficult to transplant | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Scrub Palmetto, <i>Sabal etonia</i> | Fan- Shaped | 6-8' | Shrub, low-growing twisted stem | Extremely adaptable | H | | X | X | X | | X | X |
| Remarks: Requires little care but difficult to transplant; seldom available | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Slender Lady Palm, <i>Rhapis humilis</i> | Fan- Shaped | 6-8' | Low-growing, clump type | Moist, semi- shaded area best | H | X | X | X | X | | | X |
| Remarks: Slow-growing; excellent patio palm | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Syagrus Weddell, <i>Syagrus Weddelliana</i> | Feather- shaped | 7-8' | Straight slender stem | Adaptable | H | X | X | X | X | | | X |
| Remarks: Excellent small palm | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| ¹ Salt Spray Tolerance (Salt Tol.): H - Highly salt tolerant, may be used in exposed areas near shore line; M - Moderate, 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. | | | | | | | | | | | | |