

THE AEOLIAN HARP TREE

by Peggy S. Lantz

To many people, the cabbage palm is just part of the Florida background, like sand, sun, and mosquitoes. The cabbage palm should not be held in such disdain.

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, prize-winning author of *The Yearling*, says in *Cross Creek* that "there is no more sensitive Aeolian harp than the palm." And Mrs. Rawlings was particularly receptive to its beauty, for her "irriducable minimum of happiness" was a "treetop against a patch of sky."

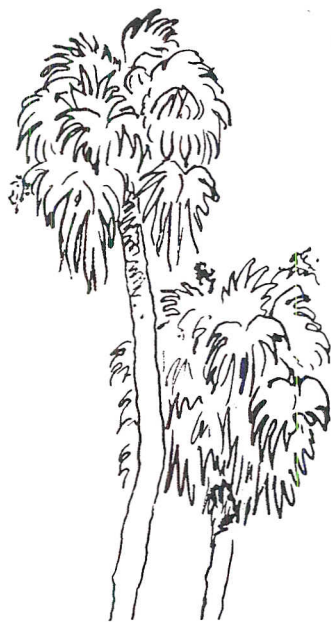
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All of these data combined lead me to believe that *beach jacquemontia* is declining at an alarming rate. Certainly, in my opinion, the species is worthy of endangered status and any concurrent protection.

SUMMARY. In point of fact, there are many more species facing possible extinction or extirpation than any of the "official" lists include. Those lists, both State and Federal, were constructed with definite goals and restrictions that may or may not reflect current population status. It is my opinion that both State and Federal lists include only about 50% of the plants in trouble in Florida. By using that tact, the lists are reasonable from a legal standpoint. And the bureaucratic system is making listing and enforcement as difficult as possible. Most of the Federal money that goes to the Office of Endangered Species of the Fish and Wildlife Service is ear-marked for animal studies. I fault no one for wanting to study the biology of rare and endangered animals, but without adequate funds, it is impossible to build a biologically and legally strong case for plants. For the past three years the Fish and Wildlife Service has funded my own research on plants proposed as endangered in southern Florida. In spite of that, we have only begun to know what the population trends in these plants might be. Moreover, of what I predict to eventually be about 300 endangered plants in southern Florida, we have been able to study in some depth only about 10%. It is with the input of the Florida Native Plant Society that we may be able to gather enough data on some plants to predict the eventual outcome.

I think mine is too. The only thing I cannot abide in a tree is its months of leaflessness in northern climes.

But Florida's state tree is a real native Floridian. The *Sabal palmetto* (or "cabbage palmetto" because of its edible heart) is never without its green fronds. In fact, it with stands freezing temperatures better than any other palm, growing as far north as North Carolina.



Sabal Palmetto

The *Sabal* genus includes many different kinds of palms from midgets to giants, all with high-sounding Latin names, but the only scientific name for the cabbage palm is *Sabal Palmetto*. The cabbage palm is one of the tallest of the *Sabals*, too, growing seventy to eighty feet tall. And it is tolerant of salt spray and brackish water.

The flower cluster usually appears in July and August, springing up from the center of the crown. The individual flowers are tiny and greenish-white, but the cluster is a huge mass. The black seed berries ripen in winter.

Do remember that if you cut out the heart of the palm to eat, you kill the tree.

I keep trying to get some expert to satisfy my curiosity as to why the trunks of some cabbage palms are "clean" and some are covered with "boots", the stobs of the broken dead fronds. The explanation that they drop off from old age, or are rubbed off by wind and rain, or animals, or branches of other trees, loses credence when a

"booted" one and a "clean" one the same size and apparently about the same age are growing side by side. The difference is probably due to some unknown cause similar to why some men are bald and others are not!

Whatever the reason, the retention of these boots is a boon. They provide saucers of water for birds and small beasts to drink from. They catch dust and dirt as well as moisture to provide tiny individual pots of soil for ferns and orchids to grow in.

Cabbage palms can be successfully planted from seeds — more successfully than trying to transplant a large specimen. Several seeds should be placed in each hole, with holes ten feet apart. When the sprouts become seedlings, remove all but one. They can also be planted in groups of three or more about four or five feet apart. Planted in sandy soil, they will grow quite slowly; planted in rich soil and well cared for, they should become five or six feet high within as many years.

Massed plantings of cabbage palms are beautiful as part of any landscaping. They are resistant to disease, insects, and drought, but, of course, will do better with some food, water, and TLC.

When we moved to our few acres outside Titusville, the area had been subject to nearly annual turnover, but a few tall pines and palmettos had survived it all. Within a very few years the cluster of young palmettos that we carefully protected from the housebuilders became large handsome specimens with beautiful crowns. Our little palmetto "woods" made a natural playhouse for the children, and invited possums, coons, field mice, and birds to our backyard.

One of the loveliest places I have been in recently is the Tosohatchee Preserve in Orange County on the St. John's River. In one or two places there, the Aeolian harps are growing together in huge masses of several acres. The dead fronds lie in a crisp carpet underfoot, and the palms are all sizes. Many ferns and orchids — common, unusual, and even rare — grow in the humus-filled boots. The shade, the birds, the occasional animal, or green snake, and the sound of the harp make a calming, gentle haven.

Take another look at the cabbage palmetto — the name is pretty prosaic, but the tree is something special.