

## THE NEEDLE PALM

by Mildred Sias  
as told to Peggy Lantz

Most of the palms native to the United States grow only in Florida. And of the fourteen palms native to Florida, all are on the Florida List of Threatened Plants except the saw palmetto, which is not protected, and the silver palm and Florida royal palm, which are on the Endangered List.

One of the most interesting palm varieties is the needle palm, sometimes called the porcupine palm (*Rhapidophyllum hystrix*), which grows in north and central Florida. Both names are appropriate, for this little palm sprouts sharp-pointed needles from the fibers at the base of the leaf sheaths. These needles pull out fairly easily, and probably were used in various ways by the Indians.

When it is small, it looks much like a small saw palmetto, and you need to look closely to see the short identifying needles. But the larger ones have a rough-textured, stocky, pyramidal trunk, with hundreds of needles up to a foot or more long sticking upward from the matted fibers. The fronds are not as stiff as the palmetto and do not have sawtooth edges on the stems.

I saw my first needle palm in the plantings near Mulford Foster's house. Mulford Foster, now deceased, was world-renowned for his work with bromeliads in the Orlando area. His needle palm was well over five feet tall, which is unusual for this dwarf species. Mr. Foster said it was many years old and very slow growing. It had been brought over from Montverde, west of Lake Apopka.

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*A needle palm growing in Oakland, Florida*

My curiosity about them was whetted and I stopped along the road again and again, looking at lots of saw palmettos in hope of finding another needle palm, especially in the wild.

My search turned up two of them, three to four feet tall, on an estate in Oakland, west of Winter Garden. When I made inquiries, I was told that another one had just been dug out of a garden nearby.

I also found two of them in Jacksonville on an estate near the St. John's River. They were growing near the street on either side of an old driveway.

Not long after, I saw workmen at Juniper Springs in the Ocala Forest destroying many small ones while clearing paths for walkways. They thought they were saw palmettos, and

didn't know the needle palm was rare. One of the workmen yanked one out of the ground and gave it to me. I took it home and planted it, but it didn't survive. Too many of its roots had been damaged.

We inquired about needle palms during a recent visit to Discovery Island at Disney World, but none of the gardeners we talked to knew what it was or if it were there. But we found several specimens while looking down from the high walkway that goes through the Aviary. We pointed them out to the gardeners.

There are also specimen plantings of needle palms on the west side of the Harry P. Leu Gardens in Orlando.

All the needle palms I have seen have been growing singly, except the groups of small ones near Juniper Springs. These palms don't seem to cluster in large clumps like saw palmettos do.

Be sure to check when land is being cleared to verify that none of the palmettos are, instead, the rare and unusual — and protected — needle palm.



*Map of FNPS Districts*