Florida Palms For Graceful Landscaping

by Hershel Womble

The palm tree — almost synonymous with “tropical” — conjures up visions of islands, light breezes, sandy beaches, and native girls.

The palm family is a large and varied group of tropical evergreen trees and shrubs, usually having an unbranched trunk topped by a crown of large palmate or pinnate leaves. The palm leaf is so typical that it carries its own name for its fan-shaped leaf. The pinnate leaf has a midrib with its leaflets arranged along each side.

Palms vary in height from ground cover size to 200 feet tall. The total species of palms around the world numbers about 4000, with more than 200 genera. The largest genera contains 200 species. Palms usually grow at elevations no greater than 4000 feet, but a couple of species are found at 10,000 and 13,450 feet in Colombia, South America.

We here in Florida are fortunate to live within the endemic reaches of the graceful palm. A total of eleven palms are considered indigenous to Florida. Palms are also indigenous to other states, but Florida has by far the largest number, as shown in the table.

The native palms of Florida have in recent years come to be appreciated as excellent landscape material, but their full potential has yet to be achieved. Most of the native palms still cannot be found at the local nursery because of insufficient demand.

Tall landscape material is provided by the Sabal palmetto (cabbage palm) throughout the state and farther north, and by Acoelorraphe wrightii (Everglades palm) from central Florida south. The Sabal minor, Sabal etonia (scrub palmetto), Serenoa repens (saw palmetto), and Rhapidophyllum hystrix (needle palm) provide lower growth habit, and may be used in many ways for a tropical, yet hardy and durable landscape material throughout the state.

The Sabal palmetto is great for placing in clumps with staggered height. The relative size difference will be maintained over the years due to the slow growth habit.

The Rhapidophyllum hystrix is an excellent specimen or accent plant. It is a clumping type palm which stands stiffly upright and grows relatively slowly. The Sabal minor and Sabal etonia may be planted singly or in a group. They provide good color and foliage contrast with other plants.

Serenoa repens is best preserved where it is in the landscape as a natural clump, as they are difficult to transplant. If small seedlings are selected and care is taken to retain a good root system, they can be transplanted.

Most palms, though, can be easily transplanted. First, root prune the plant by inserting a shovel vertically into the ground in a circle two feet or larger in diameter around the plant. Wait two or three weeks, then remove the plant, taking care to retain the circle of roots left after root pruning. A generous addition of organic material placed in the new home is very beneficial. The rule of

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A BACKYARD
NOTEBOOK
by Doris Rosebraugh

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Each seedling in a separate one
gallon container.

The only economic importance of
the palm here in Florida is its sales for
landscape purposes and as “heart of
palm,” a canned vegetable. Limited
use is also made of the thatch palms,
including Coccothrinax argentata,
Thrinax microcarpa, and Thrinax
parviflora, but only in south Florida
as they are cold sensitive and often
difficult to transplant.

This is not true, however, in other
areas of the world. Culture of date
palms is known to have occurred as
early as 3500 B.C. Palm products,
besides dates, include coconuts,
sugar, the betel nut (chewed as a mild
stimulant), building material, fiber,
wine, and wax. India reputedly
consumes 800,000,000 pounds of
palm sugar annually, and the widely
used carnauba wax is a palm product.

Satinleaf: Chrysophyllum oviforme.

Satinleaf is an astonishing tree on a
windy day, seeming to change color at
the whimsy of each gust of breeze. Small
in structure, reaching only 25 to 30 feet
in height, with a trunk of 10 inches,
it towers in beauty. The tendency of the
main leader to lean in one direction or
develop, as West and Arnold describe,
“an upright, plume-like crown,” makes
it contrast with its many round-topped
hammock neighbors.

Besides the color of the leaves —
deep, glossy-green on top with a
downy, bronze-satin beneath — they
have a distinctive, firm shape, growing
from two to six inches long, ovate,
abruptly pointed tips and rounded
bases with entire margins. The bark is
also attractive, but usually goes
unnoticed because of the blazing
foliage. Inch-long, oval fruit matures off
and on all year, turning a deep purple
when ripe.

Satinleaf is versatile nutritionally,
thriving in sandy, excessively well-
drained soil and yet again in moisture-
retentive marl. It prefers a high pH,
making it a natural for alkaline soils, and
it is salt tolerant to Belt 2. I was also
impressed by the way a large, old
specimen in my neighborhood survived
our severe Christmas weather when
nearby natives such as paradise trees
went through dramatic defoliation.

Landscape uses for this tree are many,
including the usual entries, townhouse
and small yards. In addition, it should be
used on median strips and other public
places, singly and in groups. I frequently
use three in a triangular planting,
turning each tree so the “plume” leans
to the outside of the circle, at the same
time nipping a few inner branches to
encourage them to come together a
little more, yet leaving room for the air
circulation that stirs the leaves so
attractively. When using satinleaf, more
is better.

As a result of our severe winter, I am
asking my readers to help me collect
information on range, cold tolerance,
damage, and rate of recovery.

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