

Uncommon Palms for Central Florida

Palms are one of the most commonly used plants in the Florida landscape. Palms are monocots, which belong to the *Arecaceae* or *Palmae* Family. Worldwide, there are over 2000 different species of palms. In central Florida, around 20 different species are available and commonly planted, but many more will grow well in our subtropical climate. Leu Gardens has over 350 species of palms growing in the collection. These are evaluated for their suitability to our climate. Below are 20 uncommon palms that deserve to be used in our local landscapes.

1 *Acrocomia aculeata*, the Macaw Palm, is native from southern Mexico to Brazil. This is a very fast growing palm to about 40 feet tall. This pinnate palm closely resembles the common Queen Palm, *Syagrus romanzoffiana*. The main difference is that the Macaw Palm is armed with black spines. These spines are found on the trunk and leaves. It likes full sun and is drought tolerant. A related species that has been lumped into *Acrocomia aculeata* is the Gru Gru Palm, which has shorter leaves and is not as fast growing.

2 *Allagoptera arenaria* is called the Seashore Palm. It is native to the dunes of southeastern Brazil and is very drought and salt tolerant. This palm forms clusters, growing 4 - 6 feet tall. The green leaves are silvery on the undersides. The Seashore Palm needs full sun and well-drained soil. It is an excellent small palm for Central Florida's sandy soil and will thrive in a hot and dry location of the landscape.

3 *Arenga engleri* is a clustering palm native to Taiwan and the Ryukyu Islands (at the southern tip of Japan). It is sometimes called the Clustering Sugar Palm. There are two forms of this palm.

The form from Taiwan grows larger and can reach 10 - 15 feet tall. The form from the Ryukyu Islands only grows 5 - 6 feet tall and has smaller leaves. The pinnate leaves are dark green and silvery underneath. The inflorescences of this



Acrocomia aculeata spikes

early summer. The flowers have a peach-mango scent and can perfume a large area. Visitors to the garden never guess that a palm is responsible for such a sweet scent. The Clustering Sugar Palm will grow in sun or shade but looks best with at least afternoon shade.

4 *Attalea cohune* is a large palm native from southern Mexico to Nicaragua and is called the Cohune Palm. It can grow 40 - 50 feet tall but remains trunkless for decades. The leaves are upright and may be over 20 feet long. The Cohune Palm will grow in sun or shade with moist soil.

palm bear extremely fragrant flowers. These are produced in late spring and

Acrocomia aculeata in landscape

Older specimens are magnificent with large, massive trunks.

5 *Beccariophoenix madagascariensis* is native to Madagascar. It is known as the Manarano Palm and grows 30 - 40 feet tall. Young plants have leaves that are undivided except near the petiole creating "windows" in the leaves. Older plants have fully divided leaves. A young Manarano Palm needs shade but older specimens can grow in sun. It also needs moist soil and is prone to iron deficiencies, especially younger plants. It thrives on acidic soil, common in central Florida. This palm is fairly tender to cold but would grow well under a tree canopy where it would be protected from frost. Mature palms resemble the Coconut Palm, *Cocos nucifera*, and are hardier to cold. This palm is almost extinct in its native habitat.



Bismarckia nobilis, the Bismarck Palm, native to Madagascar, is one of the most ornamental of all palms. It is a large palm that grows 30 feet tall. The large palmate leaves are an intense silvery-blue color and can be 5 - 10 feet across. It likes full sun and well-drained soil. It is very drought tolerant once established. Most Bismarckia Palms grown are the silvery-blue form. There is also a form with green leaves, not as spectacular in color but the leaves are larger. It is not as cold hardy as the silvery-blue form and is not often sold. Seedlings of the silvery-blue form often have a purplish tinge to them. The more purple coloring as a seedling, the more intensely silvery-blue it will be when mature. The seedlings of the green form are green as seedlings. *Bismarckia nobilis* is slow growing for the first few years then speeds up as it matures. They are almost impossible to transplant until they have developed a trunk, so plant this palm in its permanent location. It is very popular in southern Florida landscapes.

Calamus caryotoides is an unusual palm, climbing and vine like. It forms clumps with very slender stems that grow to about 20 feet tall. The leaves are dark green and fishtail shaped. The palm is also armed with small spines. It climbs with the aid of flagella, a slender, whip-like structure that is produced. These flagella have backward pointing spines that help attach and anchor the palm to the trunk of another tree. *Calamus caryotoides* needs a shaded area and moist soil. There are hundreds of species of Calamus. Most are climbing and viscosly armed making huge clumps of spiny stems. *Calamus caryotoides* is one of the smallest species and more suited to the homeowner's landscape, as it is not as spiny as other *Calamus*. It is native to northeastern Australia. The stems of some *Calamus* are the source of true rattan.

Caryota obtusa, the Mountain Giant Fishtail Palm, is native from northern

India to southern China where it grows in mountainous forests. This is a large palm that can reach 100 feet tall in habitat but grows 30 - 40 feet in central Florida. The trunks are massive and columnar and the leaves reach 20 feet in length and nearly as wide. The trunk is solitary and does not cluster. This palm will grow in sun or shade but needs moist fertile soil, especially if grown in full sun. *Caryota gigas* and *Caryota kiriwongensis*, both from the mountains of Thailand, are very similar and may be the same palm as *Caryota obtusa*.

Chamaedorea microspadix is often called the Hardy Bamboo Palm. It is a clustering species with slender stems that resemble bamboo. The clumps grow 8 - 10 feet tall. It also produces bright red fruit several times a year. This colorful fruit contrasts nicely against the dark green leaves and stems. *Chamaedorea microspadix* needs shade and moist soil. It is native to eastern Mexico.

Copernicia alba is known as the Caranday Palm. It has a slender trunk and can reach 30 - 40 feet tall. The palmate leaves are a silvery color. This palm

needs full sun. It is drought tolerant but can also grow in wet or seasonally flooded soil. The Caranday Palm is native from southern Brazil to northern Argentina and Bolivia. A very similar palm is *Copernicia prunifera*, the Carnauba Wax Palm from Brazil. The leaves of this palm are covered in a thick layer of wax and are the source of the famous carnauba wax. The leaves of *Copernicia alba* also have a layer of wax and is the source of the inferior caranday wax.

– continued page 6



Copernicia prunifera trunk

Copernicia prunifera

Palms continued from page 5

1 *Livistona decora*, the Ribbon Palm, is native to eastern Australia and was until recently known as *Livistona decipiens*. It is a fast growing palm, 30 - 40 feet tall. The palmate leaves are very deeply divided into long, thin segments giving the palm a weeping look. It is very drought tolerant once established. The Ribbon Palm is a good substitute for the common *Washingtonia robusta*, Mexican Fan Palm, as it does not grow as tall. This makes it suited for smaller scaled landscapes. The shorter height also makes it much less susceptible to a lightning strike, which is usually the most common cause of death of *Washingtonia robusta* in central Florida.

1 *Livistona nitida* is known as the Carnarvon Gorge Palm. It is native to southeastern Queensland, Australia. This palm grows 30 - 40 feet tall. The leaves are a shiny green and the leaflets are weeping. Young plants are slow growing but become faster as they mature. It will grow in sun or shade and is fairly drought tolerant though it grows best with moist soil.

1 *Livistona saribus* is the Taraw Palm, native to southeastern Asia and can grow 30 to 50 feet tall. This palm has large leaves that are deeply segmented. The petioles are armed with large attractive spines that resemble shark teeth. Taraw Palm also has fruit that is a glossy blue color. This palm will grow in sun or shade and needs moist soil. It can also grow in periodically flooded locations or in wet, mucky soil. There is a form of this palm



Livistona saribus petiole spines

that has maroon colored petioles. This form is not as cold hardy as the green petiole form and is suitable only in the warmest areas of central Florida. The green form can be grown throughout the region.

1 *Phoenix acaulis* is the Dwarf Date Palm. It is a clustering palm that is usually trunkless and grows 3 - 5 feet tall. It grows in full sun or light shade and is very drought tolerant. The Dwarf Date Palm is native from northern India to southern China.

1 *Phoenix rupicola*, the Cliff Date Palm, is native to India where it grows on hillsides. It is a slender palm that reaches 25 feet tall. The leaves are dark green. The Cliff Date Palm is the most graceful of all the Date Palms and makes an

excellent specimen. It will grow in sun or light shade and is fairly drought tolerant but looks best with moist soil. On your next visit to the Gardens, see the hybrids



Phoenix rupicola

that are a cross between *Phoenix rupicola* and the common Pygmy Date Palm, *Phoenix roebelenii*. These are also very attractive palms that combine the best features of both parents.

1 *Sabal causerianum* is native to Puerto Rico and southern Hispaniola and is called the Hat Palmetto. It is a large growing palm that can reach 30 - 40 feet tall. The trunks are very thick and robust. The trunks are also smooth and gray and resemble columns. It is slow growing when young but the rate increases as it matures. It likes full sun and is drought tolerant. *Sabal domingensis*, the Dominican Palmetto, is similar. It is native to Hispaniola and eastern Cuba.

1 *Sabal mauritiiiformis* is probably the most distinct of all the *Sabal* species. It has a very slender trunk that reaches 40 - 50 feet tall. The dark green leaves are

deeply divided and are silver on the undersides. This palm will grow in sun or shade and likes moist soil. It is also the least hardy of all the *Sabal* species and grows best in the warmer sections of central Florida. It is native from southern Mexico to northern South America.

18 *Sabal uresana*, the Sonoran Palmetto, native to northwestern Mexico, has leaves that are bluish green, almost silvery, in color. The color can be similar to that of the leaves of *Bismarckia nobilis*. This palm grows 30 - 40 feet tall with a thick, robust trunk. It needs full sun and is very drought tolerant. It is also slow growing.

1 *Trachycarpus latisectus*, the Windamere Palm, is native to northern India. It is still

new to cultivation since being discovered in the mid 1990's. This palm has a slender trunk and will grow 30 feet tall. The palmate leaves are not deeply divided and are circular in shape. The Windamere Palm grows best in part sun or shade with moist soil. It is a very rare and endangered

palm in its native habitat.

29 *Wallichia densiflora* is a very attractive palm with dark green leaves that are silver colored on the undersides. The leaves have leaflets that are jagged and fishtail shaped. The palm is clump forming and will grow to 10 feet tall. It

likes a partially shaded location and moist soil. It is native from northern India to Myanmar. *Wallichia caryotoides* is very similar and grows just as easily.

For More Information

BOOKS

Betrock's Guide to Landscape Palms, Alan W. Meerow, 1994, Betrock Information Systems

An Encyclopedia of Cultivated Palms, Robert Lee Riffle and Paul Craft, 2003, Timber Press, Inc.

Palms Throughout the World, David L. Jones, 1995, Smithsonian Institution Press

INTERNET

International Palm Society
<http://www.palms.org>

Palm and Cycad Societies of Florida
<http://plantapalm.com/>

Central Florida Palm and Cycad Society
<http://www.plantapalm.com/centralfl/default.asp>



Sabal uresana