

Sabal palmetto

Family: *Arecaeae*



Cabbage palm in St. Augustine



Cabbage palm in the Florida Everglades

Cabbage Palm; Sabal Palm

Origin: Southeastern United States

U.S.D.A. Zone: 8-11; thought to be hardy to at least 15°F

Growth Rate: Slow

Typical Height: 40'

Habit: Solitary; canopy of 24-36 leaves

Crownshaft: None

Leaf: Costapalmate, strongly recurved; divided to about 1/2 into numerous segments, some stiff, some drooping

Leaf Size: Typically 5-6.5' long and 3' wide

Salt Tolerance: High for salt spray on leaves, low for salt in root zone

Drought Tolerance: High

Wind Resistance: High

Light Requirements: Medium to High

Soil: Widely adaptable

Nutritional Requirements: Low

Potential Pests: Ganoderma; palmetto weevils; Texas Phoenix palm decline

Propagation: Seeds, germinating in 2-3 months

Human hazards: None

Uses: Small palm; excellent for seaside areas; specimen; roadways, parking lots; parks

Natural Geographic Distribution

The cabbage or Sabal palm, *Sabal palmetto*, is found from North Carolina, south through Florida, the Bahamas, and Cuba. In the continental United States, they attain their fullest development in Florida, where they form an important feature of the landscape. They grow in groups of a few specimens to several hundreds or even thousands, mostly in low swampy areas, freshwater wetland ecosystems, coastal areas, in hammocks, pine forests, and mixed hardwood forests. The cabbage palm may be the understory plant for many decades. It does not tolerate long term flooding by salt or brackish water. Cabbage palms have also proliferated in many urban areas. They grow out of cracks in concrete and are a steady companion against structures of all sorts where landscape tools do not reach. The palm is one of the world's most cold tolerant palm, hardy to at least 15°F. It is the state tree of both Florida and South Carolina.

Ecological Function

The cabbage palm provides food for wildlife; the small round fruit is eaten by birds, squirrels, raccoons, bears,

and deer. The leaves serve as a habitat for frogs and bats will roost underneath the brown leaves. There are thread-like fibers on the leaves. These are used by birds to build nests. The flowers are sweetly fragrant and attract bees. It is a nectar plant for the eastern pygmy blue (*Brephidium isophthalma*), southern hairstreak (*Fixsenis favonius*) and other butterflies. Underneath its canopies epiphytes thrive on the trunk or in leaf bases that remain on the palm after the leaves have fallen. A dense wreath of golden polypody ferns, *Polypodium aureum*, are often seen on the trunk. **Strangler figs**, *Ficus aurea*, commonly germinate in the leaf bases. In some parts of Florida, the trunk is often covered with the trumpet creeper, *Campsis radicans*, or the cross-vine, *Bignonia capreolata*, both of which form a beautiful ornament, especially when in flower. In times past, indigenous people of the area used the leaves to make nets, baskets and thatch. From the trunks the Seminoles made house poles, food paddles, arrows, ballsticks and more. There is evidence that palm fibers were traded with tribes as far north as southern Wisconsin and New York. Leaves are still used for thatching traditional Seminoles houses called Cuko. The best known modern use of the palms is to cook and eat the terminal bud or “cabbage” calling it swamp cabbage or heart of palm. Apparently, the heart was not eaten before the Europeans brought metal tools because the utensils available to the indigenous people were not adequate to extract the heart efficiently. Harvesting the heart kills the palm.



Understory cabbage palms in Alva



A group of cabbage palms growing along coastal water



Golden polypody ferns growing in the boots of a cabbage palm.



Strangler figs growing in the boots of a cabbage palm.

Growth Habit and Morphology

Trunk: The cabbage palm is a solitary palm having only a single trunk. It is slow growing, often no more than 6 inches a year. A long-lived palm, it typically grows to a height of 40 feet and 80 foot specimens can also be found. Most often the trunk is straight but permanent bends are caused by the search for light by the growing point. The trunk can be completely covered with leaf bases, commonly called “boots,” which are the remnants of fallen leaves. The boots are symmetrically split through most of their length, widest at the bottom and united at the top. They are grayish in color and distinctively crisscrossing. The degree of boot attachment on the trunk varies widely. The most aged palms are almost always without boots. The trunks of bootless palms are grayish and rough. Many cabbage palms have had their boots forcibly removed before transplanted. This practice is thought by some to enhance the palm’s appearance.



Trunks with boots



Trunk without boots



Close-up of boots

Leaf: The cabbage palm has no crownshaft. The leaves emerge from the apical meristem, which is located at the top of the woody trunk, and become attached to the trunk when developed. The rounded crown usually holds several dozen leaves. Leaves are uniformly dark green, and up to 10 feet long and 6 feet wide. They are costapalmate having strongly recurved mid-ribs and leaves that fold upward just beyond the leaf base. The leaf blade is divided into numerous segments that are split at approximately 1/2 or more of the width of the leaf blade. Each leaf segment is in turn divided, often more than half its length. The split segments are either stiff or drooping some with strands of tan fibers at the end. The petiole is unarmed. In full sun, the canopy is rounded and compact with leaves from 5 to 6 feet long. In partial shade the canopy is opened and the length and width of the leaves are significantly larger.



The leaves originate from the apical meristem, just above the woody trunk.



Leaves are strongly recurved



The atypical leaf to the left is 9.75 feet long and was grown in partial shade. The leaf to the right is 7.0 feet long and was grown in greater sunlight.

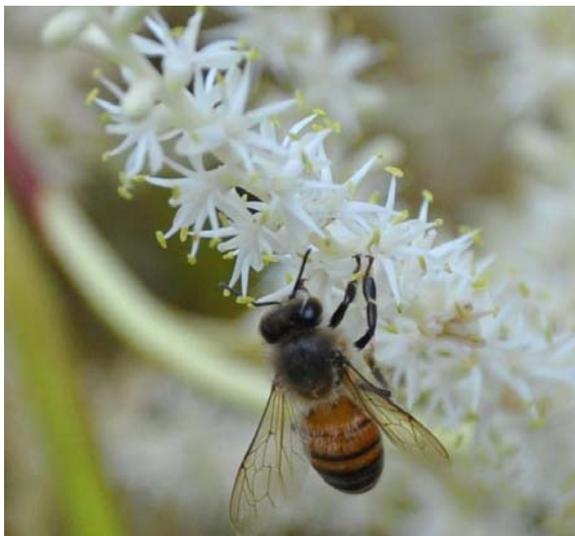
Inflorescence and Fruit: The inflorescence is a panicle with three orders of branching. It emerges among the boots and settles between and just beyond the leaves when fully extended. They contain bisexual flowers that are creamy white or light yellow. Flowering occurs from Spring through Fall. At times, Sabal palms are simultaneously flowering over a wide geographic area. The small fruit is a shiny, round drupe about 0.5 inch in diameter. It changes color from green to black as it matures. Hundreds of drupes can develop from a single inflorescence. Sabal palms may be grown from mature drupes that germinate in 2 to 3 months.



The inflorescence peduncle emerges from among the boots.



Numerous light-colored inflorescence extend beyond the length of the leaves.



A bee seeking nectar while simultaneously pollinating the flowers.



Green immature drupes

Planting and Maintenance Guidelines

The cabbage palm is ubiquitous to Florida. It's overall hardiness makes it an excellent choice for difficult situations, including retention ponds, drainage swales, canal banks, commercial parking lots and in the medians of roadways.

Cabbage palms transplant well. For landscape purposes, almost all palms are dug from swamps, hammocks, pastures, and land cleared for farms or building construction. Consequently, palms that are transplanted almost always do not have the benefit of being irrigated. Thus three practices, relating to water consumption, help to ensure higher survival rate of newly **transplanted cabbage palms**. Firstly, digging and planting the palms during or shortly after the rainy season. This allows the palms to utilize water stored in their trunks as they regrow a complete set of new roots. Secondly, the removal of almost all of the fronds before digging. This practice reduces transpiration from the leaves and allows the palms to devote its energy to growing roots. Thirdly, immediate and consistent irrigation until established.



March, planted one month earlier



November



December of the following year



April



July



September of the following year

Perhaps the number one reason for the death of newly transplanted cabbage palms is lack of irrigation water. It will take approximately 15 to 24 months for newly planted palms to regain a complete canopy. Palms should be properly staked to hold them in place. Stakes can be removed six to eight months after planting. Young palms without trunks are difficult to establish. Once established, the palm needs little or no irrigation and little or no fertilizer. If cabbage palms are fertilized, a balance, slow-release fertilizer recommended for palms should be used. Nevertheless, they perform best in moist, fertile, somewhat sandy soils.



Roots and bulb of palm that has not developed a trunk



Dehydrated roots on a mature palm

Pruning should be done so as not to remove an excessive amount of leaves. It is recommended that no more leaves be removed than would represent the hands of a clock in the 9:00 to 3:00 positions. In south Florida, pruning can be done at anytime of the year. The so called “Hurricane Cut” does not make the palm more resistant to hurricane force winds. The cabbage palm is highly hurricane resistant. With a complete canopy, it can withstand hurricanes often without losing a leaf. It stands after many hurricanes have blown over the oaks and snapped the pines in two. Seeds germinate readily in the landscape, producing many seedlings. Removing the seedlings from beneath the canopy can be a nuisance. The inflorescence can be removed before fruit set without causing damage to the palm. The roots of mature palms are not intrusive.



Two cases of over-pruned palms, commonly referred to as hurricane cuts.

Diseases and Insects

The most common cause of death of a cabbage palm in the landscape is caused by [Ganoderma butt rot](#). The fungus infects the lower portion of the trunk and the symptom of decline progresses from the older leaves upward. The leaves turn brown and droop from the trunk. In the final stage of the disease, the characteristic and conspicuous bracket or “conk” is produced. The conk is the fruiting body of the fungus and bears the spores carried by wind and wildlife. Affected palms must be completely removed and destroyed. It may be best to replant with a broad-leaved tree, as no palm can yet be declared reliably resistant. [Texas Phoenix palm decline](#) (TTPD) is a fatal, systemic disease that kills palm quickly. TTPD spreads naturally by sap-feeding insects, such as plant hoppers. The disease is currently restricted to certain Florida counties as of the publication of this fact sheet. Palmetto weevils can cause serious problem on recently transplanted cabbage palms, most likely because so many leaves have been removed and the weevils are attracted to the wounds thus created. Ambrosia beetles and palmetto scales are rarely encountered problems.

Cabbage palms can withstand forest fires and recover fully.



Ganoderma conks protrude from the lower trunk of a cabbage palm.



Signs of Ambrosia beetles found on the trunk.



Palmetto scales on the underside of the leaf..



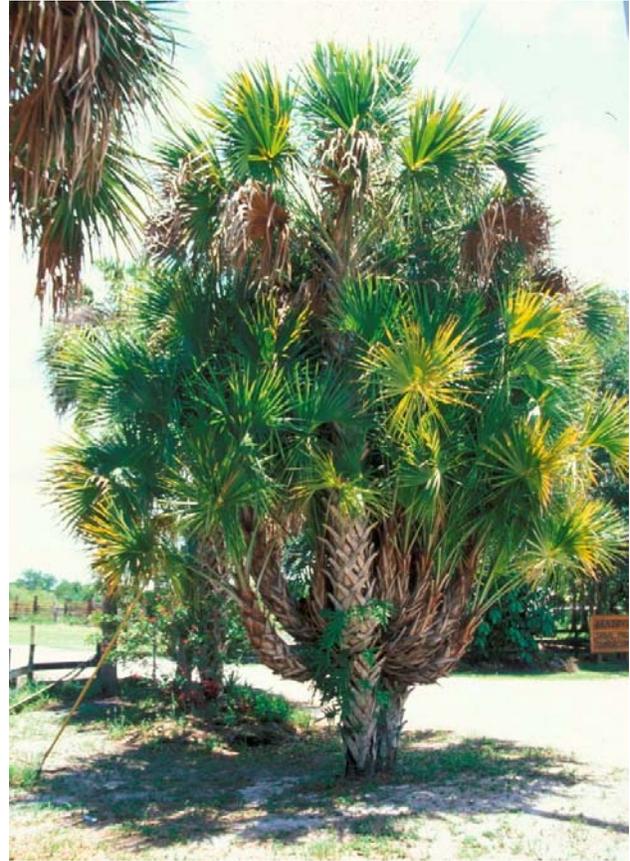
Mid-June, along I-75, two days after a fire



By late August, the palms are on their way to recovery.

Unusual Appearances

Cabbage palms are almost always single-trunked palms. On rare occasion, a palm with two trunks or rarer still multiply trunks can be seen.



References

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Useful Links

[Buccaneer Palm \(*Pseudophoenix sargentii*\)](#)
[Florida Native Palms power point](#)

[Florida Thatch Palm \(*Thrinax radiata*\)](#)
[Native Plants Fact Sheets](#)

All pictures were taken by Stephen Brown, Lee County Extension, Florida

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