

Grow a palm from seed

By Larry Williams*

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The seeds of most Florida palms ripen in late July and early August. That's when they're ready for harvesting and germination. So, now is a good time to grow palms from seeds.

In order to have success with palm seed germination, it's critical to use fresh seeds. Most palm seeds are rather short-lived. Their viability decreases in only two to three weeks.

It's best to gather palm seeds before they fall to the ground. By the time seeds drop, their viability is greatly reduced. When some of the seeds begin to fall, you'll know it's time to begin collecting them from the plant.

You usually can recognize old palm seeds by their color. They're darker than fresh ones. Seeds contain a material called endosperm, which darkens with age. You can see this change through the thin seed covering. So, it shouldn't be too difficult to tell fresh seeds from old.

After you select fresh seeds, it's best to avoid storing them for any length of time. Extended storage increases the time required for the seeds to germinate and limits the number of seedlings produced. Also, take care not to expose palm seeds to hot, dry conditions. Such exposure will cause rapid embryo shrinkage. The greater the shrinkage, the slower the germination.

Soaking shrunken seeds in water before planting may help, but they'll never regain their fresh quality. Even if the old seeds do germinate, the seedlings they produce will usually lack the vigor of those grown from fresh seeds.

Before the seeds are planted, the fleshy pulp should be removed because it often contains a natural germination inhibitor. Besides aiding germination, removal of the fleshy outer pulp will reduce the risk of fungus infection. Also, before planting, carefully examine the seeds for insects. Weevils can attack many palm species even before the seeds mature.

You can germinate palm seeds in flats containing a mixture of one-third peat, one-third vermiculite and one-third perlite or sand. Some species germinate well in plastic bags filled with sphagnum moss. If you use this method, however, the seedlings must be removed as soon as possible after germination. Carefully remove them with tweezers and put them in containers of growing media.

Palm seeds also can be germinated in ground beds as long as some bottom heat is supplied, otherwise germination will be extremely slow. Temperatures of 85 to 95 degrees are considered best. Heating cables may be used to raise the seedbed temperature to the proper level. Placing a sheet of plastic over the bed will retain heat and soil moisture.

For more information on palms, contact your county Extension Office or visit <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MENUMG:MGSH>, a University of Florida Extension Web site. For more information about gardening in our area, visit the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension Web site at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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