

Two Native Palms for North Florida

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A native plant discussion nowadays rarely includes the palms, but it can. There are two species that are native to parts of northwest Florida. Neither grows very tall, but both provide the typical coarse palm texture, form and color that are desired in many landscapes.

Saw palmetto, *Serenoa repens*, is found growing in undisturbed areas all over west Florida. It occurs in clumps and sometimes in large low thickets. The stem and leaf height seldom exceeds 5 or 6 feet, while the stems grow along the soil surface.

A study of saw palmetto has revealed that this is a very long lived plant. The main stems, or the horizontal growing trunks, were found to grow only a fraction of an inch per year. Based upon this growth rate, it has been estimated that some palmetto clumps are several hundred years old.

This is an excellent wildlife plant. The fruit provides food for several species of animals while the thick, coarse foliage is used for resting and bedding areas by both large and small mammals.

Homeowners and other land developers should be encouraged to leave these clumps and communities of saw palmetto where possible. If its roots and stems are not disturbed during development, this is an almost maintenance free plant. When left growing under natural conditions, no supplemental fertilizer, water or pest control is required.

This is one of the most difficult plants to successfully dig and move. Fortunately it is now being produced in containers by some nurseries. Since these container grown plants contain all of the roots, transplanting is much easier.

Expect to pay more for a container grown saw palmetto than you would for most other landscape plants of a similar size. The slow growth rate and specialized cultural practices required add to the cost of production.

Bush palmetto, *Sabal minor*, occurs naturally in low woodlands and on flat, neglected pasture land. This is another low growing palm and it could be confused with saw palmetto. The easiest way to tell the difference is by examining the petioles, or leaf stems. Saw palmetto has projections along each side of stems that look and feel like the blade of a fine toothed saw, while the petioles of bush palmetto are smooth.

The bush palmetto is the lesser known of our two low growing native palms, but should perform well in natural landscapes. The availability of this species is probably more limited than for saw palmetto. Nurseries specializing in native plants are the most likely sources.

Question of the Week: I would like to give my centipede grass lawn an early start this year. When should it be fertilized?

Don't be in a big hurry to fertilize. You can even wait until April. If fertilizer is applied before the lawn breaks dormancy and begins to green up, the fertilizer will be wasted. The grass will not resume consistent growth until the soil temperatures warm. Though this will start in March, there can be considerable fluctuations in temperature until April. Remember to fertilize centipede lightly. This grass can be seriously damaged by heavy applications of high nitrogen containing fertilizers.

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