

## Sago Palms Thrive in North Florida



Photos by David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Leon County Extension: sago palms

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**T**he sago palm brings somewhat of a tropical look to north Florida landscapes. Though referred to as palms, sago palms are not true palms. Botanically, they are members of the Cycadaceae family and are more correctly called cycads. But because they are so similar to palms in both looks and growing requirements most people just call them palms.

Sago palms are usually used as specimen plants to give a tropical touch to the landscape. The sago has attractive deep green, feather-like leaves with a graceful, weeping growth habit.

There are two species of sago grown in Florida : queen sago, *Cycas circinalis*, and king sago, *Cycas revoluta*. Queen sago is not sufficiently cold-hardy to be grown in north Florida . It is only grown in south Florida whereas king sago will tolerate colder weather and is grown throughout the state. Even the king sago palms can be injured by the rare extreme hard freezes with temperatures down into the teens or single digits.

The common landscape error many people make with sago palms is not allowing enough space for them to develop into a mature plant. It's not uncommon to see sago palms planted too close to a building, sidewalk, or driveway. Even though they grow slowly, they can easily reach six to eight feet in width and four to six feet in height.

Sago plants are either male or female. Female plants will eventually produce a round felt-like mass which is the flower. Male plants eventually form an elongated cone-like structure. The plant has to be mature (fifteen, twenty years old or older) before it produces its reproductive structure. When this happens, people are usually surprised by this "unusual" growth that originates from the center of the plant. If a pollen producing male is close by, the female flower may be pollinated and viable seeds formed. The golden colored flower structure will partially open in fall, revealing the bright orange walnut-sized seed.

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New sagos can be produced from these seed. Wait to collect the seed until after the flower falls apart naturally. Otherwise the embryo is not fully developed. Commercial growers of sago palms remove the outer fleshy pulp from the seed and treat them with gibberellic acid to achieve a higher percentage of germination.

Sagos also can be propagated from offshoots called pups, which grow from the lower trunk or base of the parent plant. Remove the pup with a sharp instrument. Try to avoid damaging the parent plant. Plant in a well drained soil and place in an area with partial shade until a root system develops. Then you can gradually increase the light level.

Sagos growing in a landscape need to be fertilized three to four times a year, March through September, with a special fertilizer for palms, available at most garden centers. Refer to label instructions for fertilizer rates.

Frizzle top, caused by the deficiency of manganese, is common in sago palms. As the condition develops new leaves near the top of the plant first turn yellow and then tan and take on a zigzag or accordion, giving rise to the term “frizzle top”. To correct and/or prevent frizzle top, apply one to five pounds (depending on plant size) of manganese sulfate to the soil annually. Frizzle top will be more common where soil pH is too alkaline or where roots are staying too wet, thus making the manganese less available.

Scale insects are common on sagos. Inspect the underside of leaves on a regular basis, especially if you notice leaf-yellowing or black sooty mold on the foliage. To control, treat with insecticidal oil, being sure to obtain coverage of the underside of the leaves.

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