

Native Palms Important Part of Local Landscape



Photo by Jody Walthall: Native palms such as this cabbage palm in flower and the needle palm in the background are important elements in the north Florida landscape.

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Many people see palms as the stereotypical plant of South Florida landscapes. If the person is from south Florida they quite often exclaim, “I don’t ever want to see another palm!” But palms are a common ingredient of north Florida’s natural habitats and some range along the coasts from Texas to North Carolina.

The aspect most people notice about palms is the beautiful, bold textural element they bring to the landscape. The large fan shaped leaves are totally different from a typical tree or shrub’s leaves. So palms make a bold statement as a specimen plant.

There are three reasons to use native palms and all relate to wildlife. Though non-native palms are useful in the landscape, they will not provide life sustaining benefits to our wildlife.

Native palms, as well as every other native plant, support a wide range of insects. Some may just use the plant as a hiding place or home. Others may eat the leaves or berries. These insects are the base of a many branched food chain, supplying sustenance to green anoles, skinks, small snakes and a multitude of birds as well as innumerable other animals.

Two native palms, bluestem palmetto and cabbage palm, our state tree, offer showy flower stalks to attract insects for pollination duty. Tiny bees, large bumblebees, and several species of harmless wasps, along with beetles, gather the pollen and nectar. These

insects are valuable to us for pollinating our garden plants and as a source of protein for baby birds. Though its flowers aren't as showy, saw palmetto is also an important pollinator plant and its honey is a commercial crop.

The third advantage to having a native palm in your yard is the abundant fruit they produce. Huge flocks of robins and cedar waxwings will descend on cabbage palm fruit in a feeding frenzy. Many other birds, opossums, raccoons and other wildlife utilize this food source. The berries are also eaten by native rodents who then become breakfast, lunch, or dinner for owls and hawks.

There are four native palm species that are used in the landscape in north Florida. Saw palmetto thrives in full sun, but tolerates considerable shade, reaching six feet in height and eight feet in width. It can grow on dry as well as wet, poorly drained sites, and it comes in two foliage colors – yellow green or silvery gray.

Bluestem palmetto reaches the same size as saw palmetto, but is less dense. It does best in the shade of hardwood trees and prefers rich, moist woodland soil. The leaves have a subtle bluish-green hue and the eight foot flower and fruiting stalks are stunning.

Needle palm grows slowly to a maximum of eight feet tall by ten feet wide. It also needs hardwood shade and prefers rich woodland soil. Use it in a woodland garden, privacy border or as an accent plant in a foundation planting.

The stately cabbage palm can grow to seventy-five feet tall. It is tolerant of full sun or considerable shade. Cabbage palms tolerate almost any soil and sport showy flower and fruiting stalks. The trunk fibers are used by birds in their nests.

If you want a true piece of North Florida in your landscape, want to help wildlife, and want a beautiful accent, plant a native palm this winter!

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