



PALMS OUT

THERE'S A PALM FOR JUST ABOUT ANY PLACE YOU'RE PLANTING.

BY JANE BERGER

You can't always get what you want—unless, that is, you're into palms. Lisa Gimmy, ASLA, of Lisa Gimmy Landscape Architecture in Los Angeles, finds palms uniquely suited to small gardens, given small root balls that leave “a very tiny footprint on the ground.” One that Gimmy likes to use is the blue hesper or Mexican blue palm (*Brahea armata*), native to Baja California, Mexico, with stunning, silvery-blue, fan-shaped fronds and creamy white flower clusters that cascade down from the leaves. Gimmy selects palms for spatial characteristics first, then for texture, leaf color, and the character of the trunk. “They are like poems,” she says. “With the head up in the air, there's really nothing else like it.” Gimmy also likes palms because they provide “instant gratification, and that's very important in Southern California.”

Ray Hernandez, the president of the International Palm Society, told me a story about a friend who drives from Long Island, New York, to Florida every year to pick up specimens that will last for just the summer season. “The folks that live out in the Hamptons and have 10 zeros behind their bank account can afford to haul up a coconut palm or something hardier and plant it in their landscape, and they do it on a yearly basis,” he said. “It's that whole mentality of bringing the tropics home with you.”

Although some palms will survive winter temperatures down to -5 degrees Fahrenheit, they are shrubby in form rather than the tall, majestic varieties such as coconut, royal, and date that many people associate with palm-lined avenues in Miami, Los Angeles, and other warm locations. Wherever they're from—the



tropics of the Amazon, the heights of the Himalayas, or the deserts of the Middle East—palms share the same characteristics. They are flowering trees and shrubs that bear fruits from the coconut and date to the currently trendy acai berry that is said to have numerous health benefits. They have single or clustering trunks and leaves that look like fans or feathers. A few palms even have trunks or stems so thin they resemble vines and clamber up trees, shrubs, and other structures.

Unlike hardwood trees, palms are monocots and do not produce secondary growth that, with age, increases

LEFT
The coconut palm is ubiquitous in south Florida and other tropical locations.

RIGHT
Native to Mexico, the endangered Guadalupe palm is prized as a specimen in California landscapes.



TOP LEFT

The Puerto Rico palmetto is known for its gray cylindrical trunk and deep green leaves.

RIGHT

Leaves of the cohune palm look like feather dusters.

ABOVE

The sagisi palm arches over a patio.

the diameter of the trunk on woody plants. Palms have adventitious roots instead of taproots, and most flower once a year. Tall, erect palms are often called “trees,” but the shorter clumping and vining palms are most often described as woody, shrubby herbs.

There are more than 2,500 species of palms. The date palm was cultivated in ancient Mesopotamia more than 5,000 years ago, and it is mentioned often in the Bible and the Koran.

Around the world, it has enormous economic importance. The coconut palm produces meat, milk, and water, and its outer husk, coir, is used to make ropes, baskets, brushes, and mats. The trunk is used by some for timber, and palm wine and vinegar are made from the flower stalk.

Palm oil comes from African oil palms; wax palms from South America are used in polishes, candles, and varnishes; the black sugar palm of Malaysia is processed for fiber, sugar, wine, and arrack, a distilled liquor. The native American cabbage palmetto (*Sabal palmetto*) is used to make wharf pilings, baskets, mats, and brushes, and its buds are edible. Saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*), another native, produces small black berries touted for prostate health. Other items made from palms include parquet and rattan, charcoal and dyes, fencing and jewelry, chess pieces, clothing, animal feed, cosmetics, handicrafts, medicine, bows, and spears.

Jason Dewees, the author of *Designing with Palms* (Timber Press, 2018) and a horticulturist at Flora Grubb Gardens in San Francisco, says coyotes, foxes, and western bluebirds use palms for sustenance, hooked orioles create nests in desert fan palms, and the trees are “a great source of nectar and pollen for pollinators.” He explains that an individual palm inflorescence has an enormous number of flowers that open progressively, and “a bee can come back to a flowering palm over and over again over the course of a couple of weeks and have a reliable source of nectar.”

Dewees has been obsessed with palms since he was a child, visiting his grandparents in Florida. At age 17, he was the youngest member ever to join the International Palm Society. As his knowledge increased, he turned his preoccupation into a career as a palm specialist, consultant, and designer.

Dewees notes that the palm family is amazingly diverse. In Hawaii, he says, there are about 25 species of the native genus *Pritchardia*, a fan palm. “Some are short; some are tall; some are big; some are small. Some grow up at 4,200 feet in the cloud forest, some down by the sea in a brackish environment.” A wax palm from the Andes, *Ceroxylon*, prefers “cool, foggy conditions.” It grows at an altitude of 11,500 feet in Ecuador and Colombia, and “with enough irrigation, thrives in the Northern California climate,” he says.



TOP LEFT
The Florida thatch palm is excellent for small spaces.

TOP RIGHT
The yellow butterfly palm is often used to add color to landscapes.

RIGHT
At Santa Monica's Tongva Park, the silver European fan palms stand out in this composition by James Corner Field Operations and the meadow expert John Greenlee, Affiliate ASLA.

Most palms are happiest in tropical locations, but Dewees says some can be grown successfully up north. He says the farthest north palms are reliable on the West Coast is near the Canadian border of Washington State along Puget Sound. On the East Coast, shrubby palms, notably the needle palm (*Rhapidophyllum hystrix*), about five feet high with fan-shaped, deeply divided leaves, will probably survive as far north as Cape Cod. Given some protection with proper placement, he says, "you might even see the Chinese windmill palm (*Trachycarpus fortunei*) in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden." It's said to be the hardiest tree palm, and Dewees believes that because of the Gulf Stream, it might prosper in Europe as far north as Edinburgh, Scotland. He says it's regularly seen in London, in Ireland, and on the south and west coasts of England.

The number of palms in cultivation gives designers a great choice for specific landscape situations. Jesse



Bergman and his father, Phil, own the Jungle Music Palms, Cycads & Tropical Plants nursery in Encinitas, California. They carry about 700 species of palms. Jesse Bergman says palms can be used to form a canopy, a centerpiece, to screen views, to create shade for foliage plants, and for "that lush, tropical feeling" that a lot of clients desire. Other clients want palms with thorns or bristles "because they keep people and animals out of their yards."

Bergman says the Canary Island date palm (*Phoenix canariensis*) is among the most common palms in California. It's ubiquitous in Los Angeles, despite the problem of fusarium wilt, a fungal disease that has killed many trees. The king palm (*Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*), with feathery green leaves and a ringed trunk, is also popular, often used as a street tree, in groves, or as a specimen.

Bergman's favorites include the teddy bear palm (*Dypsis leptocheilos*) with a reddish-brown, fuzzy crown and the yellow butterfly palm (*Dypsis lutescens*), a multistemmed palm with a white trunk and a crown of yellows and golds, "what we lovingly call the neighbor blocker."



TAMARA ALVAREZ, TOP LEFT; JUNGLE MUSIC PALMS, CYCADS & TROPICAL PLANTS, TOP RIGHT; CATLIN ATKINSON, BOTTOM



TOP LEFT

Date palms can be either single-stem or clustering, with angled leaflets and delicious fruits.

TOP RIGHT

Designers favor the Satake palm for its shiny, purple-brown crownshaft and arching fronds.

ABOVE

The bismarck palm's silvery-blue leaves and generous crown span provide screening.

Palms native to deserts, including the date palms (*Phoenix* spp.) and the California fan palm (*Washingtonia filifera*), do best in hot, dry climates like Palm Springs.

The European fan palm (*Chamaerops humilis*) is valued in California, Florida, and South Carolina because it tolerates desertlike or oceanside climates and can be used as a single-stem specimen or pruned into a cluster for an attractive hedge. The clara palm (*Brahea clara*) thrives in California, either in foggy coastal conditions or the hot, dry climate of inland areas. The queen

palm (*Syagrus romanzoffiana*) is also very forgiving, growing well in Florida and California and prized for its lush, feathery leaves and medium size.

Craig Reynolds, a landscape architect in Key West, Florida, uses palms in almost every project. The species with palmate leaves come in different colors, he notes—silver and light green and dark green—and “they’re very bold and give you a lot of drama.” Reynolds sometimes uses tall coconut palms (*Cocos nucifera*) to create ceilings in landscapes and smaller ones like Florida thatch palms (*Thrinax*

radiata) or the native Florida cherry palm (*Pseudophoenix sargentii*) for visual breaks at the property line “so you don’t see the neighbors.”

As a specimen, perhaps contained within a deck near a swimming pool, Reynolds might use a Satake palm (*Satakentia liukiuensis*), with a deep burgundy-purple crownshaft and flat, pinnate fronds. “It’s very graceful and organized,” Reynolds says, “and it just looks like the perfect palm tree.” The bismarck palm (*Bismarckia nobilis*) is another favored tree, 20 to 70 feet high with a crown spanning 18 to 22 feet. It has fan-shaped, silvery, rigid leaves that Reynolds uses to “punctuate” a landscape.

Working mainly in south Florida, the Keys, and the Caribbean, Reynolds has innumerable options when selecting palms, and he orders some from Botanics Wholesale in Homestead, Florida. Mike Tevelonis, the firm’s general manager, says there is nothing else quite like *Copernicia* palms, a diverse group of fan palms from the Caribbean and South America. They’re known for their massive, smooth trunks “that look like concrete pillars.” Tevelonis says these palms are like “living sculptures,” with deep green, fan-shaped leaves that have a silver tint as well.

JUNGLE MUSIC PALMS; CYCADS & TROPICAL PLANTS, TOP LEFT; BOTANICS WHOLESALE, TOP RIGHT; STEPHEN DUNN, BOTTOM

COYOTES, FOXES, AND WESTERN BLUEBIRDS USE PALMS FOR SUSTENANCE.

RIGHT

The diverse *Copernicia* genus includes *C. gigas* and *C. rigida*, both native to Cuba, and the rare *C. baileyana*, with a trunk that resembles concrete and deeply cut, overlapping, fanlike leaves.

BELOW

The native Florida cherry palm is often used in Florida, here popping up in a narrow space among evergreen ground covers designed by the landscape architect Craig Reynolds.

Some *Copernicias*, like *C. baileyana*, are rare to uncommon, with trunks 40 feet high and two feet in diameter.

Tevelonis planted *Attalea cohune* on either side of his driveway. “I wanted a tunnel to drive under,” he says. This palm has upright, feathery, arching leaves, but it takes many years before it lifts up and forms a trunk.

Jeff Searle, a partner at the Rainforest Collection in Southwest Ranches, Florida (Broward County), also grows rare and exotic palms. For something unusual, he recommends the flame-thrower palm (*Chambeyronia macrocarpa*), a slow-growing, relatively small palm, just 30 to 50 feet high, with large, wide leaves that emerge bright red in a show-stopping display. Another captivating species is the sealing wax palm (*Cyrtostachys renda*), with a thin, 30-foot-high trunk that looks like bamboo and a

brilliant scarlet crownshaft just below the dark green pinnate leaves.

In Charleston, South Carolina, Cindy Cline, ASLA, of Wertimer + Cline Landscape Architects, has a narrower choice of palms because not too many survive the colder winter temperatures. She says the firm mostly uses the native cabbage palmetto (*Sabal palmetto*)—the state tree—because it’s cold-hardy, tolerant of drought and salt spray, and can also thrive in brackish water. It’s “a tough and versatile plant,” she says, that can “create instant height on an otherwise treeless site.” It’s a relatively slow-growing palm, so Cline plants them at different heights and staggers them along a property line to make a living buffer.

She also plants palms in a colonnade pattern, “setting up a rhythm and order...to deliberately shape a space or extend the lines of the architecture out into the garden.” Charleston gardens are often small, and Cline says palms are perfect for narrow beds and tight spaces “where not many other plants of any height would work.” As an accent or specimen, she might specify the southern jelly palm (*Butia odorata*), with arching, bluish-green leaves, burgundy flower buds that open to creamy white, and edible fruits of gold to deep orange. Taller palms with notable characteristics include the Chinese windmill palm (*Trachycarpus fortunei*), hardy to 10 degrees



Fahrenheit, which Cline uses “to introduce another texture into the garden.” It has green fanlike leaves and a trunk that “almost looks furry.” Although the plant palette in Charleston is limited, the ordinary *Sabal palmetto* “contributes in a very sensory way to the space,” she says. “The palm fronds in a light breeze will rustle ever so slightly,” and the sun, at certain angles, will “highlight and catch the silvery green aspect of the palm leaves...and throw interesting shadow patterns against walls.”

No matter where you work, palms are an attractive alternative to trees and shrubs if the weather is not too cold. Ray Hernandez of the International Palm Society says it’s because “it’s a plant that looks like no other plant around.” ●

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BOTANICS WHOLESALÉ, TOP; BARRY FITZGERALD, BOTTOM