

Serenoa repens Saw Palmetto¹

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Introduction

Saw palmetto is an extremely sturdy palm with great textural interest that blends in well with natural or seaside landscapes (Fig. 1). This low, clumping, bushy palm has large, fan-shaped leaves and multiple trunks that creep along the ground, creating a dense ground cover. Most saw palmettos have green leaves, but a form with blue leaves can be found along the southeast coast of Florida. Three-foot-long flower stalks appear in spring, covered with small, yellow-white, fragrant flowers, the source of a commercial high-grade honey. The flowers are followed by small, yellow berries that turn black, ripening August through October. These berries are an important food source for many mammals and birds.

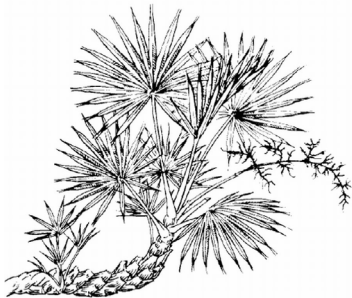


Figure 1. Saw palmetto

General Information

Scientific name: *Serenoa repens*

Pronunciation: sair-ren-NOE-uh REE-penz

Common name(s): saw palmetto

Family: *Aracaceae*

Plant type: palm

USDA hardiness zones: 8 through 11 (Fig. 2)

Planting month for zone 8: year round

Planting month for zone 9: year round

Planting month for zone 10 and 11: year round

Origin: native to Florida

Uses: mass planting; specimen; naturalizing; border; reclamation plant; accent; ground cover; attracts butterflies

Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the plant



Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Description

Growth rate: slow

Height: 5 to 10 feet

Spread: 4 to 10 feet

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Plant habit: palm
Plant density: open
Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: parted
Leaf shape: star-shaped
Leaf venation: palmate
Leaf type and persistence: evergreen
Leaf blade length: more than 36 inches
Leaf color: silver/gray; blue or blue-green
Fall color: no fall color change
Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: yellow-white
Flower characteristic: spring flowering; pleasant fragrance

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval
Fruit length: .5 to 1 inch
Fruit cover: fleshy
Fruit color: black
Fruit characteristic: inconspicuous and not showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: showy; typically multi-trunked or clumping stems
Current year stem/twig color: not applicable
Current year stem/twig thickness: not applicable

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in part shade/part sun; plant grows in the shade
Soil tolerances: alkaline; clay; sand; acidic; loam
Drought tolerance: high
Soil salt tolerances: good
Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Other

Roots: usually not a problem
Winter interest: no special winter interest
Outstanding plant: plant has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more
Invasive potential: aggressive, spreading plant
Pest resistance: no serious pests are normally seen on the plant

Use and Management

Surviving only on rainfall once established, saw palmetto grows on any well-drained soil in full sun to shade, and is highly salt tolerant. Best transplanted when young, larger specimens ideally should not be removed during land clearing, since plants grow very slowly and transplant so poorly. This happens because stems frequently grow along the ground as they droop under the weight of the foliage. Therefore, the root system may not be located beneath the foliage but could be 5 to 10 feet away at the base of the stem. Twice the desired number of collected saw palmetto are often planted since mortality is high. Saw palmetto is becoming more available in containers from nurseries. Homeowners should make an effort to leave native stands in place beneath existing trees when developing a new lot since they require no maintenance.

Saw palmetto should be planted on 3- to 5-foot centers to establish a new mass planting. They make a wonderful ground cover effect beneath existing or newly planted trees. Upright plants can be grown into beautiful multi-stemmed specimens but these are not common and quite expensive.

The variety *sericea*, silver palmetto, is recognized by some authorities and has beautiful silver leaves.

Propagation is usually by seed but seedlings grow very slowly.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern.