



Palms and Palm Look-Alikes

Although none of these plants are winter hardy here in St. Louis, we have a long enough season to enjoy them outdoors, bringing a feeling of the tropics to our midwestern backyards. The challenge is to move them in and out of our homes in a timely manner and to provide for their modest needs for light, water and fertilization, which differ slightly from one type to the next. Details are included in the individual descriptions, but here are some of the basics:

Care and Maintenance

- The palms and palm-like plants that are generally available in the nursery trade are native to tropic and subtropic areas and will need to be kept indoors until nighttime temperatures are consistently above 50°. In St. Louis this generally means do not move them outside until mid-May and bring them back in for winter protection before mid-October.
- Water and light needs for these plants vary by species because they grow in many different types of environments. Although we tend to associate them with sunny, hot and humid areas, some are happiest in dry, desert-like conditions, others prefer shade and moisture, and there are a few that fit in between. Getting to know your plant is key!
- While some of these plants will grow quite large in their native environment, most of them are slow-growing and being grown in a container will also limit their growth. It is vitally important, however, NOT to prune these plants to control size: if the growing tip is removed, the plant will die. In addition, refrain from clipping old fronds until they become fully brown – photosynthesis is still occurring, even when they have started to turn yellow or tan.
- Only repot when they have become completely pot-bound. Most have shallow roots that do not like to be disturbed. Keep the root ball intact as much as possible; the roots are somewhat brittle so don't try to open or spread them out.
- Fertilizing needs are generally pretty low – use a slow-release fertilizer higher in nitrogen, with supplemental magnesium and calcium, 2 or 3 times during the growing season.

What Kind of Palm Do You Want?

Bottle Palm – *Hyophorbe lagenicaulis*

Light: Sun to Part Shade

Moisture: Medium

Average Mature Size: 8-10' x 8-12'

A uniquely shaped trunk and stiffly pinnate, widely arching foliage provide an arresting focal point for this palm on the patio or poolside in summer as well as indoors for the colder months. Slow-growing, loves heat and sunlight, needs excellent drainage and adequate water. Endemic to Île Ronde, Mauritius.

Cat Palm – *Chamaedorea cataractarum*

Light: Sun to Part Shade

Moisture: Medium

Average Mature Size: 3-6' x 2-4'

Dense cluster of deep green stems topped with feathery fronds provides a very full and classic palm look without taking up too much space. Slow-growing Mexican native, with a rounded form that works well as an indoor tropical accent.

Chinese Fan Palm – *Livistona chinensis*

Light: Shade to Part Sun Moisture: Medium Average Mature Size: 6-10' x 4-8'

Large stiffly pleated leaves are held upright on light brown branches like broad, bright green fans. Slow growing, especially as a houseplant, eventually developing a single, upright trunk. Brings an elegant, tropical feel to any environment as long as there's room for its wide, abundant spread. Native to southern Japan and Taiwan.

European Fan Palm – *Chamaerops humilis*

Light: Sun to Part Shade Moisture: Medium to Dry Average Mature Size: 3-6' x 4-6'

Silvery blue-green, fan-shaped fronds that arch outward on thorny, woody stalks. Slow-growing Mediterranean native that is extremely low-maintenance, with a fairly good tolerance to cooler weather as well as adapting easily to indoor conditions.

Lady Palm – *Rhapis excelsa*

Light: Shade to Part Sun Moisture: Medium to Wet Average Mature Size: 4-6' x 3-4'

Wide, finger-like fronds are dark green and held on multiple, bamboo-like canes at varying heights for an overlapping, layered look. A native of China that provides a broad airy backdrop for shorter houseplants as well as a graceful accent on a part sun porch or patio.

Majesty Palm – *Ravenea rivularis*

Light: Shade to Part Sun Moisture: Wet Average Mature Size: 5-10' x 4-5'

Tall, stiffly upright fronds arise from a low cluster of stems that develop into a thick, tan-colored trunk. Madagascar native that slowly grows into a very large specimen with the elegant, vase-shaped form of a palm prototype. Somewhat challenging, but will thrive in bright, indirect light, high humidity and with consistently moist soil.

Parlor Palm – *Chamaedorea elegans*

Light: Shade to Part Sun Moisture: Medium to Dry Average Mature Size: 2-6' x 2-3'

Softest of all the palms, multi-stemmed with fronds of varying size and height which provides a full, graceful look. An excellent beginner plant that is slow-growing and adapts well to indoor temperatures, lower light and average watering. Rainforest native of southern Mexico and Guatemala; one of several species that are wild-harvested as long-lasting cut greens (xate) for use in floral displays.

Ponytail Palm – *Beaucarnia recurvata*

Light: Sun Moisture: Dry Average Mature Size: 6-8' x 3-5'

Whimsical and eye-catching, a short, sturdy trunk with a bulbous base narrows upward into a pointy tuft of narrow, strappy leaves that spill down like a messy topknot. Not a true palm but a caudiciform (swollen stem) shrub from eastern Mexico that stores water in its elephant-foot base. Slow-growing and extremely easygoing houseplant that adds a unique flair to the summer patio.

Pygmy Date Palm – *Phoenix roebelenii*

Light: Sun to Part Shade

Moisture: Medium to Dry

Average Mature Size: 5-6' x 4-5'

Long, feather-like fronds spread outwards from a rough, spiky trunk. Often planted as a small group, causing the trunks to flare out gracefully. This native of southern China and Vietnam needs space, growing abundantly broad on relatively thin trunks, making a great presentation bordering pools and patios.

Sago Palm – *Cycas revoluta*

Light: Sun to Part Shade

Moisture: Medium

Average Mature Size: 2-3' x 2-3'

Shiny, dark green, spiky branches curl up and outward from a rounded pineapple-like trunk. Provides a surprisingly soft texture from a distance while preserving its touch-me-not personality up close. Not a true palm but related to conifers and ginkgoes, this native of southern China and Japan is very slow-growing and may only produce one frond a year. All parts of this plant are poisonous.

Silver Bismarck Palm – *Bismarckia nobilis*

Light: Sun to Part Shade

Moisture: Medium to Dry

Average Mature Size: 10-12' x 6-8'

Striking fronds fan outward like a circle of sharp, silvery steel-blue swords. This is a palm that dominates, with strong, slightly arching branches that explode from a thick, cross-hatched brown trunk. Easy to care for with a moderate growth habit, happiest in sun and with good drought and cold tolerance. Native of Madagascar.

Stick Yucca – *Yucca gigantea* syn. *Y. elephantipes*

Light: Sun to Part Shade

Moisture: Medium to Dry

Average Size: 3-5' x 2-3'

Spiral rosettes of tall, sword-shaped, blue-green leaves that are smooth and spineless, topping cylindrical tan trunks which are often planted in groups. Not a true palm but a member of the asparagus family and the tallest of all yuccas, growing into a large tree with a thickened base in its native Central American habitat.