

## Palms for Landscaping in South Texas – Part 1 of 2

Professional landscapers, homeowners and commercial property owners are planting more and more palm trees in their landscapes. Why? Because they are attractive plants that give a tropical image to your landscape as well as providing: windbreaks, obstructing an unsightly view, accentuating your pond or pool, and giving some shade in small or narrow spaces. This week the **Texas Sabal, Chinese Fan** and **Mediterranean Fan palms** will be featured. Next week in lieu of the article on Ponds the second part of this palm series will feature *Cocus plumosus*, *Sago*, and *Washingtonian Fan* palms.

There are many different types of palms, all with different frond (leaves), trunk and growth characteristics. Of the many different species of palms that occur in the world only six are recommended for the Rio Grande Valley. Of these six, only one, *Sabal texana* or Texas Sabal Palm, is native to Cameron County, Texas.

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### **Texas Sabal Palm**

**Texas Sabal Palm** (*Sabal texana*). This palm is tall, with slow growth to 50 feet, straight trunked and has a cluster of large fronds at the top producing a dense, rounded crown. It is freeze hardy to 10 degrees F. The flowers which occur in March - April, are white, fragrant, and appear on 7- to 8-foot long drooping stalks originating from the center of the crown. The seeds are dull-black berries. The fronds or leaves are fan-shaped, and this palm is the only one with spineless leaf stalks. Growth is best if planted in full sun. It will grow in any soil, tolerates poor drainage, is drought tolerant and requires little maintenance.

The Rio Grande flood plains and resaca banks in Cameron and Hidalgo Counties are its natural habitat. Of the original 40,000 acres of Sabal Palm Forest in Texas, only two groves (less than 100 acres) exist today. The original name given to the Rio Grande by the Spanish explorers was Rio de las Palmas due the abundance of Sabal Palms growing along the riverbanks and inland. The place to view an original remnant of the Sabal Palm forest in Texas is the Sabal Palm Grove Sanctuary (phone # 956-541-8034), southeast of Brownsville. Wildlife use this palm for cover, nest sites, and food; and pioneers used the fronds for thatch and the trunks for pilings.

The other five palms that grow well in the Rio Grande Valley, and in some cases have become naturalized, are: **Chinese Fan Palm, Mediterranean Fan Palm, Queen Palm** or *Cocus plumosus*, **Sago Palm** and the two **Washingtonian Fan Palms** (Mexican and Californian).

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## **Chinese Fan Palm**

**Chinese Fan Palm** (*Livistona chinensis*). This palm has slow growth to 20 feet and large fan-shaped fronds producing a 6-foot wide, rounded, dense crown. It tolerates full sun, some shade and drought conditions. It is cold tolerant to 16 degrees F. This species does well in containers or in the ground. Flowering occurs in March - June and produces large, olive sized, black-green berry clusters in August - October, which hang from 3-foot long horizontal stalks. This palm can be a great addition to your landscape where a short palm is needed and is the only palm recommended for shade to partly shady areas.

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## **Mediterranean Fan Palm**

**Mediterranean Fan Palm** (*Chamaerops humilis*). This palm can be grown as a clump or clustering plant due to off-shoots or can be grown as a solitary palm by removing all but one trunk. Growth is to 10 feet with an 8 foot wide canopy. This palm is salt tolerant and therefore recommended for landscaping in the coastal areas of Cameron County. This plant requires full sun and will tolerate partial shade. Leaf blades are bluish to gray-green and the leaf stalks have forward-pointing sharp spines. This palm is cold tolerant to 15 degrees F.

(Information source: Bulletin of the Palm Society of South Texas, 10 Nassau Dr. Rockport, TX 78382 and *Palms of the World*, 1992, Blombery & Rodd eds., HarperCollins Pub.)

Article written by the Cameron County Horticulture Education Committee.

Questions or Comments write to: Cameron County Master Gardeners Association, 1390 W. Expressway 83, San Benito, TX 78586-3869.

Phone: 956-361-8236 or Fax: 956-361-8289 or email:

[camerountymastergardeners@gmail.com](mailto:camerountymastergardeners@gmail.com)