

Friday's Feature

By

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January 11, 2009

Arbor Day emphasizes the importance of trees

In 2009, Arbor Day in Florida is January 16th. Arbor Day is a nationally-celebrated observance that promotes the benefits of trees in the urban environment and encourages tree planting and care.

Arbor Day, the creation of Julius Sterling Morton, first took place in 1872 in Nebraska. Throughout his career, Morton worked to improve agricultural techniques throughout the United States, serving as President Grover Cleveland's Secretary of Agriculture. Nearly one hundred years later, in 1970, President Richard Nixon proclaimed the last Friday in April as National Arbor Day. Since then, every state in the nation and many countries around the world have designated their own Arbor Day. Florida celebrates the third Friday in January as Arbor Day.

To celebrate Florida's Arbor Day, consider planting a tree. Trees help reduce air pollution, conserve energy and beautify the State of Florida.

One "tree" to consider is our Florida State Tree, the cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*). Many native Floridians will call it swamp cabbage. Swamp cabbage is an old-time Florida cracker vegetable obtained from the heart of the cabbage palm; although, harvesting this delicacy will kill the palm.

Although they are treasured for their delicious hearts, they are more valued as an ornamental palm tree for landscapes, adding the tropical look to many homes in Florida.

The cabbage palm is one of the most popular and most practical palms for home landscapes, due to its relatively small size, when compared to other palms, and ease of care. It usually grows to about 40 feet and has a single trunk with a crown of about 15 feet in diameter.



Brushes and brooms can be made from young leaves, and the large fan shaped leaves have been used by the Seminole Indians in Florida as thatch for traditional pavilions, called chickees.

Photo credit: Theresa Friday

The leaves of the cabbage palm are fan-shaped and curve into the shape of a "C". This can help you with their identification, "C" for "cabbage" palm. Old leaves will fall from the palm, leaving behind leaf stem bases or "boots" arranged in a unique cross pattern on the trunk. Depending on the individual palm, some boots will remain on the trunk, while other palms will shed their old leaf stem bases.

The cabbage palm prefers to live in full sunlight, but will tolerate some shade. It is very adaptable to a variety of soil conditions. It is drought tolerant, but will also survive in standing water. It's also great for North Florida landscapes, because it can withstand temperatures below freezing.

Palms, despite their tree-like look, have more in common with lawn grasses, bamboo and corn than with oak trees or maples. Palms are monocotyledons and lack a vascular cambium so they are unable to repair their vascular tissue if damaged.

So, the most important thing to remember when caring for your cabbage palm and other palms on your property is to not damage the trunk in any way. The entire trunk of the palm is alive and cannot heal itself when damaged. Any damage to the trunk of a palm will leave it susceptible to disease and insect infestations.

While it is best to transplant most trees and shrubs in the late fall and winter, the best time to transplant a palm is in the spring and summer months (end of April through August). This is done because the soil is warm and it gives the roots time to grow vigorously.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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On many trees the leaf bases or "boots" remain securely attached while on others they slough off, leaving a fairly smooth trunk

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