

Friday's Feature
By
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Sago Palms in the Landscape

Sago palms add a tropical touch to any landscape. This interesting evergreen plant resembles a palm but is actually a cycad. Cycads are often called living fossils because they dominated the landscape during the Mesozoic era. Today, only about ten genera of cycads still survive.

In many landscapes, sago palms are used as significant specimen plants or focal points. They have shiny green, leathery leaves on a thick shaggy trunk. This plant is slow growing, usually only one flush of new growth per year, but can reach four to six feet in height. Because the fronds are sharp, it's best to keep this plant away from traffic areas or else you're likely to get stuck by the leaves.

Sagos are dioecious, meaning that there are separate male and female plants. The female produces a round felt mass in the top of the plant which will form red-orange seeds about the size of a plum. Male plants form an elongated conelike structure. Sagos can be propagated either from seed or from removing and rooting a side shoot called a pup. If you plan to propagate from seed, collect the seed after the female cone breaks apart naturally.



Male sago palms produce an elongated cone.

Sago palms are relatively easy plants to grow in the landscape. They grow best in full sun to partial shade and in soils that are well drained. Plants appreciate regular fertilization during the growing season. Between March and September fertilize two to four times using a special "palm" fertilizer. This special palm fertilizer contains several essential minor elements that are important for proper growth.

While relatively easy to grow, sagos do have some problems. Some of the most common problems include nutritional deficiencies, cold damage and scale insects. Symptoms range from yellowing to spotting to deformed growth.

One of the most frequent problems with sago palms is caused by a manganese deficiency, sometimes called "frizzle top" because the new growth will emerge with a zig-zag or frizzled appearance. This



Female sago palms produce a globe-like cone

nutritional problem is common in very alkaline and very acidic sandy soils. To correct the problem, apply manganese sulfate. Don't confuse manganese sulfate with magnesium sulfate or Epsom salts. Epsom salts will not cure frizzle top. In addition, have your soil pH checked to see if it is in a desirable range.

Sago palms can be cold sensitive. Fronds may exhibit various patterns of brown if damaged by a freeze. As long as the central growing area is not damaged, plants usually recover. Freeze damaged fronds will not green up and can be removed once the threat of cold weather has passed.

Scale insects can also be a problem on sago palms. If you notice leaf yellowing or a black sooty mold on the fronds, then check for scale. Scales are very tiny insects that cover themselves with a waxy coating making them appear white. Heavily infested plants look like they are covered in snow. More than 20 species of scale insects occur on cycads in Florida, the most damaging of which is the cycad aulacaspis scale, or the Asian Cycad scale. While the Asian Cycad scale is not running rampant in our county yet, be on the lookout for this difficult to control insect. Check with your local Extension office for the latest control recommendations.

Tip of the Week: Sago palms can be potentially deadly to pets. All parts of the plant are poisonous, but the seeds or "nuts" appear to contain the largest amount of toxins.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names 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.