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NOTES ON CULTURE

Proper Watering the Key to Keeping Palm Green*

In recent months, I have counted seven dead palms along my block in New York. It's not that we've taken to planting palms as street trees, of course, but a lot of people seem to have trouble keeping them alive indoors—especially the areca.

The irony in this is that while the areca (uh-REEK-uh) is the cheapest and most widely distributed palm, it is also one of the most difficult to grow as a house plant.

The chief killer of the areca is lack of water. As^{*}nearly as I can tell, this stems not so much from neglect, but from widely published and spoken advice to let it dry out between waterings.

I learned about the areca's need for soil that is always evenly moist when a super gardener friend from Florida visited me a few years ago. We had hardly exchanged proper greetings when he walked over to my sickly areca and said, "Why don't you ever give it a decent drink of water?"

It was then that I discovered what an

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amazing difference proper watering can make in the life of a plant. My areca is about five feet tall and grows in a 14-inch standard clay pot. I had been giving it about one quart of water a week, which meant that the soil sometimes became quite dry between waterings. In order to keep the soil always evenly moist, I have found it necessary to apply from four to six quarts of water every week.

Within six months after I switched to watering more, the new growth was shooting up vigorously—without so much as a single dead leaf tip.

In a nutshell, here is the care I recommend for areca palms: Light, some direct sun, especially in the winter, or bright light all day. Temperature, an average house during the winter heating season; avoid drafts of hot or cold air. Humidity, medium (30 per cent or more). Mist the fronds frequently with water to help keep them rain-fresh. Water generously, often enough to keep the soil moist at all times, but do not leave the pot standing in a saucer of water for more than an hour or two. Feed with a foliage plant fertilizer in the spring and summer; fish emulsion in particular is excellent for palms.

My areca has been growing in the same pot for five years without a change of soil.

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