

*Principes*, 32(2), 1988, pp. 84-85

## An Unappreciated Native: *Sabal palmetto*

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Not long ago I found myself in animated conversation with a rough-hewn fellow, dickering over his fee for the removal of a lightning-killed pine. He happened to glance over toward a group of *Washingtonia robusta* and declared, "Them are good." Shifting his gaze to some *Sabal palmetto*, he made a face and pronounced, "Them ain't worth nothin'." Horribly enough, at one time I almost agreed with his point of view.

"A prophet is not without honor, save in his own land." These revealing words perhaps explain why my initial reaction towards what has become my favorite palm was less than enthusiastic. Twelve years ago, when I left the often icy concrete of Manhattan to settle in the warm sand of central Florida, I was overwhelmed by the profusion of tropical foliage and blooms. Friendly neighbors visited bearing gifts of plants, turning my yard into a lovely jungle of crotons, hibiscus, philodendrons, allamandas and many others. But it was the beauty of the palms that staggered me; they were so lovely and hailed from so many places on the globe. There were Washington palms, *Rhapis* palms, queen palms, Chinese fan palms, windmill palms, European fan palms, *Butia capitata* and many species of *Phoenix*.

There was also the cabbage palm. "What an awful name," I thought. *Sabal palm* and *Sabal palmetto* sound better, but a little voice always whispered "cabbage palm." No Floridian shopping mall, large or small, is complete without several of them stuck into tiny islands of dubious soil dotted here and there in the parking area. The golden arches of McDonald's are often

overlooked by several grotesquely barbered *Sabal palmetto*. Therein lies another reason for my early disdain. It has become a tradition for many mall managers to call a tree maintenance firm once a year practically to defoliate these plants. The workers often leave very little, removing the majority of green leaves because they won't be back for a year. It is truly awful to see sixty-foot sabals with tiny heads trying in vain to sway gracefully in the breeze. The shopping malls may sidestep the expense of picking up an occasional fallen leaf, but the aesthetic cost is enormous.

It was only when I got a wider view that I began to appreciate *Sabal palmetto*. It is at its picturesque best when lining the meandering rivers and streams of the Southeast. Here, the trunks achieve serpentine shapes in the struggle for sunlight and often arch incredibly far out over the water. Some, having toppled into the water, but still managing a root-hold on shore, have curved their heads upward again, giving the impression of a palm growing straight out of the river. In the Everglades, the cabbage palm (now I love that name) forms large stands wherever there is slightly higher ground in the sea of sawgrass. I have also seen lone specimens, ragged but magnificent, standing up to the raging winds and constant salt spray on the barrier islands of Georgia.

I do not believe there is a tougher palm than *Sabal palmetto*. Huge trucks loaded with them roar down the highways, the root-pruned bases exposed to the sun and wind, the tops reduced and tied to protect the buds. I've noticed the trucks sitting in convenience store lots, with the trees broil-

ing in the heat while the drivers have a cold drink and flirt with the clerks. Incredibly, almost all of these trees survive.

I have many cabbage palms on my property, but two of them have a story illustrating the adaptability of the species. I saw the pair in a small nursery and immediately wanted them. They had personality. There was no question of buying only one because they somehow seemed like buddies. Their trunks were blackened by fire (quite common) but the heads of both were lush. Neither palm had any roots, having just been stuck into the nursery ground a week or two earlier. When I bought them, the palms, both ten feet tall, were cut back to four or five leaves, yanked out of the ground, tilted into a small truck, delivered to my yard and slid out into holes waiting to receive them. A year elapsed before they regained full heads.

I'd always wanted to live on a lakeside, and when the opportunity presented itself, I moved to a lakefront home. My two favorite cabbage palms moved too. A maniac with a tree spade transferred them for me, knocking over a large steel road sign with the bud portion of one of them. The palm survived the thrashing, but I'll admit to murderous thoughts at the time. These two palms have traveled more than many people, but look so splendid now, they appear to have germinated and grown where they stand.

The large deeply-pleated leaves and "basket weave" leaf bases which make the cabbage palm pleasing to gaze upon also provide favored housing for tree frogs, lizards, and insects, something which, for me, increases their appeal.

*Sabal palmetto* is extremely easy to grow. The seeds germinate so freely that the aforementioned islands of soil in mall

lots often contain hundreds of seedlings. If the soil is loose, you can simply tug tiny plants out. The seeds will germinate just as easily in moist sand or potting soil. Cabbage palms are relatively slow growers. On a good site with plenty of sun (they grow quite well in shaded locations too), water and fertilizer, you can go from seed to five feet in as many years. Shape is extremely variable. Some ten-foot cabbage palms are five feet of trunk and five feet of leaves, while others will have ten feet of leaves with no visible trunk. In the past, the only Sabals commercially available here were large specimens dug from the wild on order, but nurseries specializing in native flora have recently begun growing them for mined-land reclamation and for landscaping purposes.

Sabal palms have few problems. In my gardens, they withstood 14°F with no damage, and have laughed at light snowfalls on two other occasions. They occur naturally on the southeast coast as far north as Cape Fear in North Carolina. They don't like drought or flood, but established plants can tolerate prolonged periods of either. Various scales and caterpillars sometimes invade; large palms can cope, but smaller specimens should be treated appropriately. Small plants may be eaten by rabbits and rats, so I erect a protective circle of poultry wire for the first several years.

Occasionally in flea markets one sees a table heaped high with cabbage palm buds for sale. Obviously, this atrocious practice kills the tree, just so someone can taste "heart of palm." This is all the more barbarous because Florida is being "developed" and denuded at a sickening pace, and because the cabbage palm is our state tree. It deserves to be conserved and grown, not casually destroyed.