

Palms, 43(2), 1999, pp. 65-67

Indoor Palm Culture

LYNN MCKAMEY

Rhapis Gardens, P.O.B. 287, Gregory, TX 78359 USA

Most palms purchased in garden centers have spent the first part of their lives being grown in greenhouses as fast as possible with high light and lots of fertilizer. They are then shipped from the grower to the nursery and finally purchased and taken home. Poor palms! What an ordeal! To help them recover from shipping shock and adjust to life indoors, first check the soil level. Does it cover all the roots and appear to be of good quality? If not, add a little extra soil or repot it. Then, allow the palm to become slightly dry and instead of watering once, drench the soil to flush out excess fertilizers and soluble salts. Water thoroughly three times in a row, allowing 5-15 minutes between irrigations. Lastly, clean all the leaves and inspect for insects. Treat if any are found. After the soil and foliage drip dries, the plant is ready for its special place in your house.

Best indoor palm growth will occur with the brightest indirect light available. A south- or north-facing window provides good indirect light; south and west windows should be shaded by outdoor trees or a lightweight curtain to protect the palm from direct sun which might scorch leaves.

The ability of palms to adjust to indoor light is related to the amount of light they received in commercial production. Consider that most plants have been raised in lush tropical greenhouses with partial shade and high humidity. Newly purchased houseplants adapt slowly to new surroundings and low interior light. Place new plants in an area with bright indirect light for a few weeks, then, move them to lower light areas. As the palm grows new leaves they will be larger than the old ones and adapted to lower light.

Watering Procedures and Tips

Most palms should be thoroughly watered when almost dry. To be certain that the root ball is completely saturated, use a shallow saucer and allow water to drain through the soil and fill the saucer. Leave extra water in the saucer to be absorbed by the palm.

If a palm is allowed to dry completely or is not thoroughly watered, wilt may occur. A just-wilted palm can often be revived without damage if the root ball and pot are soaked for several hours. If the plant stays wilted for too long, you may not be able to revive it. If a palm is watered too often, it may develop root rot that will also result in wilt or death. If a palm appears to dry out every few days, either: 1) the pot is too small for the root system and the palm should be repotted, 2) the palm is not being thoroughly watered, or 3) the root ball has become loose in the container. Re-settle the palm into the pot by gently pushing the soil down. Repotting may be necessary to correct this problem.

If you live near fresh water springs or lakes and have wonderful water, use it. Alkaline or "hard" water will slowly kill any plant. Occasional leaching of salts with deionized or rainwater will help prevent salt damage.

Fertilizing Indoor Palms

Most indoor palms are very slow growing and live in low light. Consequently, these palms require very little plant food. Under low light, feed at $\frac{1}{4}$ rate 3 times per year. Under medium light, feed at $\frac{1}{4}$ rate 6 times per year. Under very bright filtered light, feed at $\frac{1}{2}$ rate 6 times per year. Use a houseplant fertilizer with a balanced nitrogen-phosphorous-potassium ratio, such as 20-20-20. Slow release fertilizer may be used; follow the above low dosage recommendations. It is always better to under-fertilize than to over-fertilize. Too much plant food can cause burned tips, injured roots, and eventual decline and death of the palm. Use leaf color as a guide: bright green leaves indicate good fertilizer levels, but if leaves become slightly yellow, apply a very weak dose of a plant food.

Soils

Many palms are not too particular about soil as long as it is well drained and rich in humus. If you do not like to formulate your own mix, use a



1. An elegant houseplant, *Rhaps excelsa* in a decorative pot is tolerant of low light levels.

good quality soil purchased at the garden center. A sandy soil usually should be avoided because it quickly dries out and easily sifts out of the pot. A clay soil retains moisture and may cause root rot. Bark is often too porous. A well drained mix should allow water to move slowly through the pot. If water stands on top of the soil and takes over 5 minutes to drain through, replace the soil with a lighter mix (one with more perlite or sand).

Pots

Either plastic or clay pots can be successfully used for most palms. Clay pots are porous and breathe, but they also can absorb as much water as the plants. Extra water left in a saucer will prevent the clay pot from robbing moisture from the soil and palm.

The soil level should cover all roots and, if the palm is multi-stemmed such as *Rhaps*, the base of the canes. Otherwise, roots dry out and may

die. Sphagnum moss or decorative gravel can be used to top dress the soil.

Pests, Rot, Tip Burn, and Other Grim Subjects

Proper culture prevents most plant problems. The most common indoor pests are scale, spider mites, and mealybugs. Each time you water your palm, take a few minutes to look for a possible insect infestation, and treat it immediately since most insects reproduce very quickly and can kill a plant in a very short time. If you suspect a problem and are not sure what kind of creature is attacking the palm, or how to eliminate the pest, take an infected leaf to your local garden center for advice.

Burned, brown tips are usually caused by over-fertilizing, improper watering, or continuous use of alkaline (hard) water. Badly burned, black tips (in which the burn spreads up the leaves at a fast rate) can indicate a boron or fluoride build-up or root rot. Check the roots. White or light brown roots suggest a healthy palm; red, pink, or black means root rot; dark brown roots may indicate an overdose of boron from a fertilizer or a fluoride build-up from a water supply. Use only distilled or deionized water until new leaves emerge green and healthy. If you find black, soft roots, root rot is in progress. To save the palm, you must remove affected roots, repot into a well-drained soil, and drench with a root fungicide. Another warning sign of root rot is a wilted palm with soggy, wet soil. Another signal is severe tip burn.

Occasionally, brown round spots will appear on leaves. Remove badly damaged leaves, and treat the palm with a leaf fungicide. Exposure to afternoon sun or very high light may cause burn on leaves. Occasionally, leaf splotch or burn can be caused by strong insecticides sprayed in hot weather.

If your indoor palm suddenly begins to produce new leaves that are "frizzled" (twisted and undersized) and dried out, then the palm is probably suffering from a trace element deficiency. A dash of fish emulsion or other organic material will usually correct this occasional problem, or use a balanced micronutrient fertilizer.

Recommended palms for indoor use

The following list of palms are old favorites and are perfect for new indoor palm enthusiasts; all do well in low to high light. Many other

species will adapt to indoor conditions, but the species below are the best for beginning a collection.

Chamaedorea elegans, also called "Neanthe bella," is a small palm quite suitable for low light and dish gardens. Inexpensive.

Howea forsteriana, commonly known as Ken-

tia Palm, has graceful upright feathery leaves. Expensive, but elegant.

Rhapis excelsa, known as Lady Palm, has been a popular indoor palm since the early 1700s. This clustering fan-leaf palm is available in sizes from 1–12 feet (30–400 cm) tall. Expensive, but easy to grow and long-lived.

An Invitation to Join...

THE INTERNATIONAL PALM SOCIETY

Whether you are a professional grower, a hobbyist, or a research botanist, your membership in the International Palm Society provides you with a continuous source of horticultural, botanical, and historical information about the palm family. Established in 1956, this organization includes members from more than 80 countries throughout the world, maintains a World Wide Web site, publishes *Palms* (formerly *Principes*) four times a year, maintains a mail order bookstore devoted entirely to palm-related publications, supports scientific research on palms, and hosts a Biennial Convention on even-numbered years in which members meet, attend seminars, tour palm gardens, and see palms in their natural habitat. Venues of past Biennials include Thailand, Australia, Hawaii, California, Florida, and Venezuela.

Membership is accepted on a calendar year basis. New member dues received after October 1 will be applied toward the following year unless otherwise indicated. Membership categories include Regular (\$35.00), Family (\$45.00), Commercial (\$45.00), and Library or Institutional (\$40.00). Send your name, complete mailing address, and your check (in U.S. funds, drawn on a U.S. bank, made payable to the International Palm Society) to: The International Palm Society, P.O. Box 1897, Lawrence, KS 66044-8897 USA. For direct airmail delivery to non-USA addresses, there is an additional \$25.00 per year charge. You may charge your membership on Visa or MasterCard by sending your name and complete mailing address along with the card number, expiration date, and your signature to the above address.