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Landscaping with Palms: Destroying Paradigms

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All too often, palms are bought on impulse and “designed” into the landscape the same way. Palm plantings can fail to enhance a site, because new palms are often planted anywhere there is room to dig a hole! Buyers should take time to make notes on light requirements, height, spread, and speed of growth. Palm plantings must follow basic horticultural requirements, but the design rules below are more flexible and be guided by your taste and site:

1. Never plant a palm centered on some feature of a building (e.g., a window, doorway, or bare wall).

2. Consider the spread when leaves are at “people level.”

3. Never plant palms to suggest a gracious avenue unless you have a gracious avenue.

4. Use large and massive palms with a small house to frame it and blend it into the property.

5. Plant medium or larger palms 3 m (10 ft) or more from a house.

6. Never plant large palms, especially the self-pruning kind (e.g., *Roystonea*), over parking areas.

7. Never plant medium, tall, or massive palms under power lines.



1. Palms in a small garden, including *Coccothrinax*, *Calyptrocalyx*, and *Areca*.



2. *Aiphanes minima* on a pedestal.

8. Never plant palms with similar leaflet size together unless there is a large difference in mature heights.

Palms used as framing elements can be solitary, massive types (*Phoenix canariensis*, *Copernicia baileyana*, *Borassus* spp., *Roystonea* spp.) or medium species used in groups (*Syagrus*, *Archontophoenix*, *Sabal*, *Wodyetia*, *Livistona*).

Although not usually considered shade trees,

palms are excellent as high shade. Plant them in staggered height groupings to block the early or late sun. Put that kind of slanting light to work by using understory palms with colored new leaves (*Areca*, *Pinanga*, *Gronophyllum*, *Chambeyronia*) to catch the sunlight. Create a garden-within-a-garden using palms around a small patio (Fig. 1). Orchids, bromeliads, and vines can be established on the trunks. Select palms with a spread of around 4.5 m (15 ft) so that falling leaves will not dislodge the epiphytes. *Sabal* species can support vines such as climbing palms or *Bougainvillea*.

Small-crowned palms (*Ptychosperma*, *Thrinax*, *Coccothrinax*) provide privacy when planted as staggered height groupings. Many palms can be used to hide unsightly views. Most clumping forms work nicely, and smaller species (*Chamaedorea cataractarum*, *Serenoa repens*, *Areca vestiaria*) can be planted on mounds.

To create a curved stem on a single-trunked species, plant the palm in an inclined position, 15° from vertical. Only young palms can be induced to curve. Straight-trunked species growing in a group should have their crowns separated vertically by planting the shorter individuals one-half to one full crown height apart.

People look out of windows, so place an interesting specimen (*Beccariophoenix*, *Licuala peltata* var. *sumawongii*, *Aiphanes*, *Kerriodoxa*, or *Areca* with colored leaves) in a beautiful pot where it can be seen from inside the house. Spotlight it at night! Put potted palms on pedestals rising above other plants in your garden (Fig. 2). Some slender-stemmed species can even be trained as an espalier!

Discard your old ideas. Challenge your imagination. Palms are the ultimate gardening element!