

Palms, 43(2), 1999, pp. 91–93

Palms in Temperate Climates

MARTIN GIBBONS

The Palm Centre, Ham Central Nursery, Ham Street, Ham, Richmond, Surrey TW10 7HA, UK

TOBIAS W. SPANNER

Tizianstr. 44, 80638, Munich, Germany

The bizarre nature of the idea of growing palms outside in colder climates is probably the thing which attracts most people to it. Surprisingly there is a good number of species from which to choose, and with a little common sense and care, we can achieve results which are every bit as satisfying as those of our colleagues in the tropics. Additionally the effect can be even more exciting since it is so unexpected and so unlikely.

While there are many 'hardy palms,' they can be mainly categorized into three groups according to their climatic requirements. Firstly, those palms that are extremely hardy to cold but which grow slowly if there is little summer heat. Examples are *Rhapidophyllum*, some *Sabal*, *Nannorrhops*, *Trithrinax campestris* and *Serenoa*. Secondly, those which while needing protection against low temperatures, grow very well in cool summers. These include *Ceroxylon*, *Rhopalostylis*, *Parajubaea*, *Washingtonia* and *Arenga* among many others. Finally the third group contains the most reliable species and certainly the best for the beginner. These palms are those which combine the desirable attributes of the other two groups, that is, they are extremely hardy to cold but they also grow well in our often barely mild, temperate summers. We are fortunate to be able to number *Trachycarpus*, *Chamaerops*, *Butia*, *Jubaea* and some *Brahea* as the hardest in this group.

Cultivation techniques for our temperate palms are in general identical to any others, and most hardy palms, with the possible exception of a few odd species such as *Guihaia* spp. or *Trachycarpus nanus*, are among the easiest to grow of all palms. They all require suitable soil, appropriate nutrients, and an adequate supply of water. An idea of where the palm originates from will provide clues as to its requirements. Palms from desert-like and other dry, open areas grow

best in a heavier, open, sandy or gritty soil with perfect drainage and a low humus content. Species from humid forests will require a lighter, humus-rich soil and will benefit a lot from heavy mulching. The pH of the soil plays only a minor role for nearly all temperate palms. All require an abundance of water during periods of growth and providing this can dramatically increase the speed with which the palm grows. *Trachycarpus fortunei* for example has been reported as growing a foot of trunk per year when heavily watered and claims of twice this are probably not exaggerated. On poor and dry soil, it will struggle to stay alive and can remain in a semi-dormant state for years.

Like the more tropical species, all temperate palms benefit greatly from regular applications of a suitable fertilizer throughout the growing season which, whether organic or inorganic, should be high in nitrogen, potassium, and magnesium and should contain all necessary trace elements. A foliar feed with potassium in autumn is a good idea to harden off your palms for the winter.

One of the benefits of our temperate climate is the general absence of pests, and while our colleagues in the tropics have to worry about scales and mites, thrips and mould, we can relax about these issues as they are rarely a problem; any pests that do occur are generally wiped out by the following winter's cold.

Positioning a palm, especially if considered marginal for your climatic zone, can play a most important part in its ability to survive the winter months without damage. As frost usually is the most limiting factor, choosing the warmest places in your garden can make all the difference. Particularly good microclimates can generally be found in the sun-facing sides of buildings, walls, evergreen trees etc. and on sloping



1. *Sabal minor* (top). *Trachycarpus martianus* (bottom). (Photos by S. Zona)

The 12 Most Cold-hardy Palms

Rhapidophyllum hystrix
Nannorrhops ritchiana
Sabal minor (Fig. 1, top)
Trachycarpus takil
Trachycarpus nanus
Trachycarpus fortunei
Trachycarpus wagnerianus
Trachycarpus princeps
Serenoa repens
Jubaea chilensis
Chamaerops humilis blue form
Trithrinax campestris

A Personal View of The 12 Best Specimen Palms for Temperate Climates

Jubaea chilensis (plant now for your grand-children!)

Dypsis decipiens
Parajubaea torallyi
Brahea armata
Trachycarpus princeps
Trachycarpus wagnerianus (very wind tolerant)

Trachycarpus latisectus
Trachycarpus martianus (Fig. 1, bottom)
Butia yatay
Sabal uresana
Arenga engleri
Dypsis onilahensis

ground, where cold air can move away and does not collect. In many areas, however, wind can be more of a problem than cold, especially if near the coast, and fan palms in particular can be battered by winter winds to the extent that they look more dead than alive. Shelter from the prevailing wind is thus of great importance and this should be taken into account early on when planning the exotic garden. Consider that wind in winter usually also brings that nasty cold weather and will add to potential damage by its chill factor.

Some hardy and half-hardy palms (*Ceroxylon*, *Rhopalostylis*, *Arenga*), prefer shade from the sun, and shade can be doubly beneficial since shady spots often also provide protection by overhead trees from both cold and wind. *Chamaedorea* species, such as *C. radicalis* and *C. microspadix* which are both extremely hardy to cold and incidentally much under-used, also fit into this category. Being small understory palms, they can receive optimum protection from frost by being positioned under other, taller, plants.

As enthusiasts become more confident of the ability of their palms to withstand cold and the other rigors of winter, so new species are being tried and rated for their performance. While it is

true to say that there are in fact rather few palms for those marginal climates, providing even the minimum of protection during the coldest periods dramatically increases the number that can be grown. Temporary shelters built with styrofoam, bubble plastic, reed mats, burlap, plant fleeces etc. are quick and easy to erect but very efficient and will protect your plants from those few frosty freaks in otherwise agreeable temperate-zone winters. It is good advice to protect your plants only in those periods of extreme cold which make it absolutely necessary and keep them exposed to the elements as long as possible.

An occasional failure will not put off the dedicated hardy palm enthusiast and it is, after all, the results of pure experimenting that has enabled us to come such a long way from the days when the first *Trachycarpus* to arrive at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew was planted in the tropical palm house there. The increasing number of chapters of the I.P.S. that are devoted to hardy palms is an indication of just how popular this particular branch of horticulture is becoming.