

# South Florida Landscape Design: Tree Selection (Palms)

By: *Hewitt McCloskey, Jr. ASLA, Retired*



In my opinion trees -because of their ultimate size -are the most important elements in any proposed landscape design or re-design. Since there are only a few undeveloped lots left in Eagle Ridge, I am talking for the most part about replacement of existing trees. They are trees that have died, are in poor condition, or have completely outgrown the space where they were planted and now need to be removed. Unfortunately this latter case becomes an expensive ordeal when removal becomes necessary. I know this first hand as I had to remove a large Mahogany Tree in our front yard and an even larger Live Oak in our rear yard. The Live Oak roots were also doing structural damage to our concrete lanai floor. At that time, six years ago, it cost about \$1,450.00 to remove both trees, including their roots.

In Southern Florida we basically have three broad categories of trees. They are palm trees, deciduous shade trees, and evergreen trees (conifers). *As an aside you might find it interesting to know that palm trees are more closely related botanically to the grass family than to deciduous shade trees, such as oaks and maples, or conifers, such as pines or cypress.* In general, although there are a few exceptions, individual palm trees are more vertical in nature and do not keep growing wider and wider. Also palm trees only grow from the top center of the trunk called the palm heart. If for any reason the palm heart dies, the entire palm is doomed and will need to be replaced. Palms do not develop lateral or side branches such as oaks and maples do. Again the only growth comes from the center of the palm.

For the most part, palms may be planted as individual specimens or as clumps with two or more trunks. Many multi-trunked palms such as Christmas Palms, Foxtail Palms and Pigmy Date Palms are grouped together by the nursery growers and are not found that way in nature. Other palms such as Royal Palms, Queen Palms, Canary Island Palms and Bismarck Palms are usually solitary, single trunked palms. Palms rarely outgrow their allotted space. This is true for both the multi-trunked palms, as well as other solitary or single trunked palm species.

Some of the palm species and their ultimate height and spread that I would recommend for our Eagle Ridge community when replanting include:

**Foxtail Palm** (Single and Multiple Trunks) - grows to about 35 feet in height and 25 feet wide. It is a graceful palm with unique fronds that range from 5 to 7 feet long and with an attractive trunk banded trunk. The old fronds fall off by themselves and do not need trimming.



**Christmas Palm** (multiple trunks) – grows to about 20 feet in height and 10 to 15 feet wide. They are a very attractive small palm with bright green fronds that range from 4 to 5 feet long. Often a percentage of their seed clusters turn red in the winter, which gives the palm its common name. The old fronds fall off by themselves and do not need trimming.



**Paurotis Palm** (multiple trunks, 8 to 12) – grows to about 25 feet in height and 15 to 25 feet wide; this is the first palm you see on the center island of Eagle Ridge Drive when entering our community from Daniels Parkway. The bark is very rough and unusual in appearance.



**Fishtail Palm** (multiple trunks, 10 to 15) – grows to about 20 feet in height and 10 to 15 feet wide. It is an attractive palm with unusual dark green leaves 3 to 4 inches long and

shaped like fish tails. It will grow in dense shade to full sun and is considered an excellent screening plant.



**Pygmy Date Palm** (multiple trunks) – grows to about 10 feet in height and 10 feet wide when grown in clumps of three trunks. It is a slow growing palm with graceful glossy drooping fronds that range from 3 to 5 feet long.



**Bismarck Palm** (single trunk) – grows to about 40 feet in height and 25 feet wide. I call this the “look at me” palm because of its unusual blue color. It makes a strong, distinctive and unique statement when grown as a specimen.



**Canary Island Date or Pineapple Palm** (single trunk) - grows to about 40 feet in height and 30 to 35 feet wide. This is one of the widest single trunked palms. It has a bulbous trunk, thus the nickname Pineapple Palm. This enlarged area on the trunk is usually located just below where the fronds begin; it has an interesting trunk pattern.



**Chinese Fan Palm** (single trunk) – will grow to about 25 feet in height and 15 feet wide. This attractive palm species is very slow growing and is distinctive because the tips of the fronds weep or droop.



**Sabal or Cabbage Palm** (Single or multiple trunks) – grows to about 40 feet in height and 20 feet wide. This is the Florida State Tree and is a true native to South Florida. The trunk may be smooth or covered with a criss-cross pattern of persistent split leaf bases.



All of the palms described above stay less than 40 feet high and are more suited to the lot sizes in Eagle Ridge, which average 90 feet wide by 170 feet deep. They are also more suited to the one-story homes in Eagle Ridge. Some of the bigger and taller palms, such as the Royal Palms and Washington Palms, also called Mexican Fan Palms, are attractive. However, they get to be 70 to 80 feet high and may become a hazard to your home during tropical storms and hurricanes. Again the scale of these taller palms is more suited to taller and wider commercial buildings.

In order to keep all of the palms listed above looking healthy and vigorous, they need to be fed three times a year in March, June and October with a balanced palm fertilizer that contains (N) nitrogen, (P) phosphorus and (K) potassium that includes trace elements such as magnesium, manganese, iron and boron. With the exception of the Foxtail Palm and the Christmas Palm, all of the palms listed above need to have their fronds pruned at least once a year - if not twice. Like any of the deciduous and evergreen trees, palms require regular maintenance to look their best.

Unfortunately, as is the case with all trees, there are some nasty diseases that may affect palms. They include insect damage (weevils, aphids, mites and scale), all of which are treatable with a pesticide. Other diseases that may affect palms such as Gamoderma (trunk rot) Fusarium wilt (crown wilt) and Lethal yellowing (the entire crown turns yellow) are fungal, bacterial or viral and, unfortunately, for the most part, are incurable. Nutrition deficiency can also be a common problem to palms. When certain nutrients, such as magnesium, manganese and potassium, are very low or missing, the palm fronds often turn yellow, yellow-orange or brown. In some cases the palm heart becomes very stunted, frizzled and off colored. This problem can be corrected by a balanced palm fertilizer with manganese.

In the next monthly issue, I will review some of my favorite, smaller, deciduous shade trees and evergreen trees for your consideration when replanting. Until then, happy gardening to all.