PLANT LIFE COLUMN

CABBAGE PALM

Originally from the Northeast, when I first heard of swamp cabbage, I imagined a small vegetable plant growing in a well-manicured garden. Wasn't I surprised when I heard it came from a palm tree many feet in the air! Swamp cabbage is an old-time Florida cracker favorite vegetable obtained from the heart of the official state tree of Florida, the cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*).

The cabbage palm, also known as the palmetto palm or sabal palm, grows wild all over the state of Florida. Although they are treasured for their delicious hearts, they are more valued as an ornamental palm tree for landscapes, adding the tropical look to many homes in Central Florida.

The cabbage palm is one of the most popular and most practical palms for home landscapes, due to its relatively small size, when compared to other palms, and ease of care. It usually grows to about 50 feet, but has the potential of growing up to 90 feet. It has a single trunk, with a crown of about 15 feet in diameter.

The leaves of the cabbage palm are fan-shaped and curve into the shape of a "C". This can help you with their identification, "C" for "cabbage" palm. The leaves grow directly out of the trunk of the palm. Old leaves will fall from the palm, leaving behind leaf stem bases or "boots" arranged in a unique cross pattern on the trunk. Depending on the individual palm, some boots will remain on the trunk, while other palms will shed their the old leaf stem bases.

If left remaining on the trunk of the palm, the boots will become a harborage for plant and animal life, which may be an added quality of the palm to some. You may have noticed the ferns, bromeliads, and other species of plants growing from the natural plant containers formed by the palm boots. Although, most of us enjoy the sight of the plants growing from the cabbage palms, the boots may also serve as a dwelling for undesirable insects, such as palmetto bugs. However, it's a trade-off that some don't mind taking.

The cabbage palm prefers to live in full sunlight, but will tolerate some shade. It is very adaptable to a variety of soil conditions. It is drought tolerant, but will also survive in standing water. It's also great for Central Florida landscapes, because it can withstand temperatures below freezing.

The most important thing to remember when caring for your cabbage palm and other palms on your property is to not damage the trunk in any way. Palms are unlike woody trees, in that they do not have the bark to protect them from injury. The entire trunk of the palm is alive and cannot heal itself when damaged. Any damage to the trunk of a palm will leave it susceptible to disease and insect infestations.

Swamp cabbage is a delicious traditional Florida cracker dish, but do not go out harvesting it on your own. Removing the heart of the palm kills the tree and since the cabbage palm is the state tree of Florida, proper authorization must be obtained before cutting it down.

Understanding where swamp cabbage comes from wasn't difficult to understand, but I'm still trying to figure out how the cabbage palm can be the state tree of Florida. Palms are botanically far removed from hardwood trees. They are actually more related to grass. Yes, it is true. Your palms are closer relatives to your St. Augustine grass than to the live oak tree in your backyard. Maybe we need to reconsider the cabbage palm to be called the state "palm" rather than the state "tree".

The cabbage palm is a great plant for the home landscape. Other palms that do well in Central Florida landscapes include the Chinese fan palm (*Livistona chinensis*), European fan palm (*Chamaerops humilis*), Butia palm (*Butia capitata*), and the Dwarf palmetto (*Sabal minor*).

For more information on the cabbage palm or other plant related questions, please contact the Osceola
County Master Gardeners. They are available to take your calls Monday to Friday from 10am to 2pm. They also invite you to stop by and visit their new Plant Clinic. The Osceola County Extension office is now located in the Osceola Heritage Park complex. Our new address is 1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane, Kissimmee, FL 34744 and our new phone number is 321-697-3000.

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