

Tropical Natives

Native landscaping in Southwest Florida does not mean that you have to give up on a tropical look. Florida's native plants can offer plenty of tropical appeal.

BY MICHAEL ALLEN



Southwest Florida is having an identity crisis. Or rather, the people living here are having one. Which Southwest Florida do we love? Do we love the one with the perfect, white, sandy beaches; the endless plantings of exotic Caribbean-style landscapes; the perfect-all-the-time weather? Or do we love the vast seas of untouched wilderness; the beautifully muggy and at times inhospitable terrain; the unmolested frontier that still gives us a glimpse of a Florida that seems to be disappearing every day?

Most of us love both. And these two opposing Southwest Florida identities often seem at war with each other. This inner struggle has begun to manifest itself outwardly when it comes time to landscape our homes and communities. For decades, much of natural Florida has been carved away to make room for that idealized tropical paradise, full of lush trees and palms scattered among perfectly manicured seaside lawns. But now we have begun to look around and see that much of our natural Florida has been lost. At the same time, strained resources have been put to the test, as ever-increasing amounts of water and nutrients are required to maintain some nonnative landscapes.

Many communities have responded. Local landscape ordinances that promote the use of native plants in landscaping while restricting the overuse of nonnative plants have begun to spring up around Southwest Florida and throughout the state. The City of Sanibel has been at the forefront of this movement, requiring a minimum of 75 percent native vegetation in many cases. The long-term effect of these ordinances remains to be seen, but for now, those who are affected by them—both homeowners and professionals—seem to either love the ordinances or hate them.

Strict ordinances can go a long way toward preserving natural plant communities and, presumably, conserving water and resources. Yet complex requirements can confuse residents and place undue burdens on professional landscapers. They can also eliminate the use of a wide palette of beautiful and, in many cases, environmentally friendly plants that are restricted because their origins are outside Florida.

Many view this debate in far too simplistic terms: that a native landscape may conserve and protect, while a non-native landscape is more beautiful and more tropical. This does not have to be the case. Southwest Florida is, after all, in the subtropics, and our array of native plant material contains far more than just cabbage palms, saw palmetto, and pine trees. Although certain species may be difficult to find, there are plenty of lush tropical palms and trees that call Florida home. When used appropriately, a native landscape can be as appealing and tropical as any landscape in Florida. Below is a selection of native palms and other trees that can help ease our landscaping identity crisis.

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Palms

Nothing says “tropical” more than palm trees, and palms have certainly become ubiquitous in the Florida landscape.

For many, the term “native palm” has become synonymous with the cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*), but this couldn't be further from the truth. Florida is home to many palms, from the unique to the extremely rare, and many of these can lend a superbly tropical look to the landscape.

Of course, the tropical native palm is the **Florida Royal** (*Roystonea regia*). Its natural habitat is in predominantly swampy locations in South Florida, most famously in the Fakahatchee Strand east of Naples. Here a thriving population still survives, while its distribution is more restricted throughout the rest of the Everglades and in scattered locations on the east coast.

It is thought that royal palms were much more extensively distributed throughout Florida at one time, but that their range has shrunk because of periodic freezes. Some confusion persists as to the difference—if there is one—between the Florida royal and the Cuban royal.

Because most of the original royal palms planted in Florida were imported from Cuba, the Florida population was in the past often classified as a separate species, *R. elata*. Continued research, however, has challenged whether the two populations are actually distinct, and now most botanists regard the two as the same species. In the landscape, royals are unrivaled for tropical appeal and deserve a spot in any native landscape. They are

extremely cold sensitive and do not tolerate frosts, especially when young, so they are suitable only to southern or coastal locations.

It should come as no surprise that some of the most tropical of Florida's natives originate in the Keys and extreme

trunk can make for an excellent accent to the landscape.

Since it can tolerate moderate shade as well as full sun, the Florida thatch is an extremely useful and versatile plant for native landscaping. When they are small, single or multiple plants may be used as

a tropical understory, while older specimens can make excellent street trees or be used as focal points in residential landscapes. The **Key Thatch Palm** (*T. morrissii*) is a related tree, but can be somewhat harder to obtain from nurseries. It can be worth the hunt, however, since it has the added appeal of more delicate, elegant fronds with silvery undersides. It is very slow growing, and larger specimens can be hard to come by. Both thatch palms are extremely hardy to just about any condition but cold. They are very salt tolerant and are ideally suited to seaside or coastal plantings.

A similar, but not related, palm is the **Silver Palm** (*Coccothrinax argentata*). Reminiscent of the thatch palms, this tree is even more elegant in appearance. It has deeply lobed palmate fronds that weep gently from the center. The fronds are dark green above with strikingly silver undersides. It too is slow growing, but is unrivaled in its ornamental appeal. Like the thatch

palms, the silver palm is drought and salt tolerant and grows in a wide variety of conditions.

Also from the Keys is the **Buccaneer Palm** (*Pseudophoenix sargentii*). This is a rare and slow-growing palm but is truly a unique and beautiful native specimen.



South Florida. Most notable among these palms are the thatch palms. The **Florida Thatch Palm** (*Thrinax radiata*) is readily available in nurseries and should not be overlooked. Its wide and somewhat weeping palmate fronds exude tropical appeal, and its slender

Gumbo Limbos spread their branches to give shade and ambiance to this residence.

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While planting a 100 percent native landscape can be a real challenge, combining a large percentage of native plant species with judicious use of sensible nonnative plants can achieve the dual goal of attractiveness and environmental responsibility.

Now nearly extinct in the wild, buccaneers survive in cultivation, but larger trees can be hard to find. Buccaneers are worth the effort, as they develop a majestic, royal-like trunk (although usually more slender). Their crowns produce upright, rigid, silvery, pinnate fronds that grow in a single plane when young but fill out into an attractive whorl as the trees mature. Although buccaneer palms do not tolerate cold, the trees are otherwise comparatively carefree, tolerating most soil conditions and moderate salt exposure.

Trees

Palms need not be the only means of achieving a tropical look in the landscape. Florida's selection of other native trees also offers options to achieve a lush setting. While pines, oaks, and cypresses may appear to dominate the natural environment, a few trees that truly qualify as tropical do survive in Florida.

Besides the palms, the **Gumbo Limbo** (*Bursera simaruba*) is perhaps the best known of Florida's "tropical" trees. It survives in limited locations in the wild, usually in dense coastal hammocks on the east coast. Gumbo limbos are characterized by their unusual, multi-branched, dense canopies, which provide plenty of shade. Also notable is the tree's highly ornamental trunk. Maroon-colored bark peels away as the tree ages, revealing a glossy, smooth, light inner wood. Gumbo limbos are known to grow well in most well-drained soils and are highly drought and salt tolerant. Be sure to give them plenty of room, however, as they tend to fill large spaces.

Another densely canopied tree with a similar growth habit is the **Wild Tamarind** (*Lysiloma bahamensis*). While the branching trait of the wild tamarind is similar to the gumbo limbo, the comparison stops there. It, too, forms a large umbrella-like canopy, but the leaves of the wild tamarind are smaller, more densely compounded, and have a far more

feathery texture. This delicate, somewhat weeping appearance adds to the tree's tropical appeal. Wild tamarind also produces attractive new foliage with a deep red color. This, mixed with the green older leaves, can make for a real eye-catcher in the landscape. Wild tamarinds are salt tolerant, drought tolerant, and easy to care for.

If you do not want to give up quite so much space in the landscape, a smaller option might be the **Geiger Tree** (*Cordia sebestena*). Reaching a height of only twenty-five feet, the geiger tree is a compact, densely foliated evergreen that blooms profusely. It has wide, crinkled, leathery leaves that blow like paper in the wind. Most notable, however, are the highly attractive, bright orange clusters of flowers that appear at branch tips throughout most of the year. Orange geigers can be perfect trees for small residential landscapes and, when used in conjunction with tropical palms and other plants, can add a lush, tropical color to offset the sea

of green that is often created with tropical plantings.

Compromise Is Key

Going native does not have to be boring. While planting a 100 percent native landscape can be a real challenge, combining a large percentage of native plant species with judicious use of sensible nonnative plants can achieve the dual goal of attractiveness and environmental responsibility. Florida's large selection of native plants means that we have plenty of options from which to choose. Whether native or nonnative, the most important step in any landscaping endeavor is planting the right tree in the right place—ensuring that palms, other trees, and plants will require only minimal amounts of water and nutrient inputs. Consultation with a professional is recommended. 🌴

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