

Profile Cabbage Palm

Sabal palmetto

Cabbage Palms are about as hurricane-proof as a tree can be. They stand after many hurricanes have blown over the oaks and snapped the pines in two.

The Cabbage Palm was named the official state tree of Florida in 1953 and appears in the state seals of Florida and South Carolina.

The Cabbage Palm is a robust palm with a single, unbranched trunk that typically grows to about 50 feet but sometimes may reach heights of 80 feet. It has a spread of 10 to 15 feet and has a symmetrical crown of large, fan-shaped fronds that spread around its top.

Like many palms, the crown is typically wider when grown in shade and more compact when grown in full sun. The palm's root system is deeply penetrating and may reach depths of 15-20 feet.

Young cabbage palms may take up to ten years before they begin to form a trunk. They grow slowly these first years as root system and the crown forms. Once the trunk does begin to develop the growth rate increases somewhat.

Fronds are alternate, fan-shaped, four to eight-feet long and have a midrib that curves down from the top of the tree. The leaf margins have deep divisions and, many fibers.

Fronds emerge directly from the trunk, which is often covered with old frond stem bases called "boots" that are arranged in a criss-cross pattern. Depending on the individual palm, these may persist down the trunk to the ground even in very old palms. Other trees in the same vicinity may shed their boots revealing a rough fibrous brown trunk. Eventually the trunk will age to gray and the surface will become smooth.

Organic debris often collects in these leaf bases. It is not uncommon to

see a cabbage palm transformed into a hanging garden of ferns and other species. At Corkscrew, the most commonly found fern growing in the base of the boots is the Golden Polypody.

In mid-summer, the cabbage palm bears creamy white flowers on a long branched inflorescence that is held completely within the crown. The fragrant flowers appear in early summer and are followed in late fall or early winter by green spherical fruit that is about one

third of an inch in diameter. When the fruit ripens in the fall, it is almost black in color. Inside is a shiny brown seed that is about one quarter of an inch in diameter.

Squirrels, raccoons, bears, bobwhites, wild turkeys, and many other species of mammals and birds feast on the fruits and seeds.

Parts of the Cabbage Palm have been made into a variety of things: pilings for wharfs because they resist attacks by seaworms, stems hollowed out to form pipes for carrying water, ornamental table tops from polished stem cross-sections, scrub brushes from the bark fibers and leaf sheaths, and logs for cribbing in early fortifications because they did not produce lethal splinters when struck by cannonballs.

Today, brooms have been made from the young leaves while older fronds are often made into baskets, mats and hats.

The large leaf buds of immature cabbage palms are used in cooking to make swamp cabbage and hearts of palm salad. However, removal of the bud is lethal to the palm.

Currently, young cabbage palmetto fronds are collected and shipped worldwide each spring for use on Palm Sunday. Cabbage Palms are in flower when many other plants are not and are a significant source of a strong but delicious dark-amber honey.

Cabbage Palms were an important tree to the Seminole Indians, who often made their homes on cabbage-palm hammocks. They made bread meal from the fruit, which had a sweet, prune like flavor, and they used the palm fronds to make baskets and to thatch their pavilions, called chickees. A modern chickee with the Cabbage Palm-thatched roof is part of the Strickland Outdoor Education Center by the library.

