

Profile Royal Palm

Roystonea elata, *Roystonea regia*

The Florida Royal Palm is native to the cypress wetlands, mangrove swamps, sloughs, tropical hardwood hammocks, and coastal prairies of southern Florida.

Although their numbers are decreasing in the wild, they can still be easily found in Collier Seminole State Park, Big Cypress, and Everglades National Park.

The world's largest cypress/royal palm forest, consisting of 5,000 to 7,000 Florida Royal Palms growing wild, is in Fakahatchee Strand State Park.

At home in cypress swamps, the Florida Royal Palm tolerates occasional flooding. It prefers bright sunny conditions, and it is not overly particular about soil.

Royal Palms often reach 50 to 80 feet in height in almost as many years. The tall, smooth, cement gray trunks are capped with a glossy green crown shaft several feet high, and a beautiful broad, dense crown of soft, gently drooping feathery fronds.

Flowers are incredibly fragrant, even from 50 feet away, and are produced periodically throughout the year but mostly in summer. One frond will fall about every month.

The head of the Florida Royal palm tree consists of 15-20 fronds 10-13 feet long. These droop gracefully and sway in the breeze. The trees release fronds in strong winds, probably an adaptation that prevents the whole tree from toppling during hurricanes.

It has a close relative from Cuba, *Roystonea regia*, which looks nearly identical to it. Surprisingly, the Cuban Royal is the more cold tolerant of the



Royal Palms. Honey bees and bats are reported to be the most frequent pollinators of the unisexual flowers.

The Royal Palm is the host larval plant for the Monk Skipper. Birds eat the fruits and likely spread the seeds.

The seeds are green when immature, turning red and eventually purplish-black as they mature.

There is some disagreement as to whether Cuban and Floridian populations represent one species or two separate species. Several sources lump them under the Royal Palm, *Roystonea regia* name.

two. The Cuban Royal Palm was imported from the dry hills in Cuba. The Florida Royal Palm likes wet soil and is common in cypress swamps.

Imported into Florida in great numbers during the 20's and 30's, the Cuban Royal Palm (*R. regia*) is the species most often encountered.

The trunk of the Cuban Royal Palm, *above right*, is swollen at the base. It constricts about halfway up and then swells again just below the crown shaft creating a dramatic profile.

The Florida Royal Palm (*R. elata*), *above left*, is very similar to the Cuban except that the trunk is a simple column that lacks the Cuban's curves.

The trunks of both are a smooth light gray that looks as if it had been cast from concrete. Both species produce a large three to four foot inflorescences on which both male and female flowers are borne.

Royal palms sprout from distinctive purple seeds, spherical in Florida Royal Palms and oblong for Cuban

Many nurseries and references do not distinguish between these two species since they are very similar.

Roystonea elata is important in producing medicine for treating diabetes, kidney diseases, liver cirrhosis, and heart failure.

The seeds can be used to make trans free oil, are a very good source of vitamin E, and are used in cooking. Also, the seeds are used to make palm oil soap. Livestock feed can be made of royal palm seeds. And last but not least, the seeds can be used as substitutes for coffee beans.

Did you know?

- The *Roystonea* palms were named in memory of General Roy Stone, a Union Army general who was stationed in the Caribbean, to commemorate his road building efforts in Puerto Rico.
- The Florida Royal Palm, *Roystonea elata*, is listed by the State of Florida as endangered (source: USDA).