

Thrinax radiata

Family: *Areaceae*

Florida thatch palm, Jamaican thatch, thatch palm, chit



Florida Thatch Palm

Synonyms (Discarded names): *Cocothrinax martii*, *C. radiata*, *Thrinax floridana*, *T. martii*, *T. multiflora*; *T. wendlandiana*

Origin: Extreme southern mainland coast of Florida, Florida Keys, Bahamas, western Cuba, Cayman Islands, Jamaica, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, Yucatan Peninsula, Honduras, Nicaragua

U.S.D.A. Zone: 10A-12B (28°F leaf damage)

Growth Rate: Slow

Typical Height: 20'

Habit: Solitary; canopy of 12-20 leaves

Crownshaft: None

Leaf: Palmate, induplicate, circular, slightly folded; divided about halfway into segments that are split at the tips; pointed hastula

Leaf Size: 4-5' wide; segments 2.5' long, 2" wide

Salt Tolerance: High

Drought Tolerance: High

Wind Tolerance: High

Light Requirements: Moderate, high

Soil: Widely adaptable

Nutritional Requirements: Low

Potential Insect Pests: Aphids; scales

Propagation: Seeds

Human hazards: None

Uses: Small gardens; containers; outdoors patios; roadways; parking lots; seashores; specimen



Left: The infructescence (fruited stems) hang in a circle around the trunk, sometimes extending beyond the leaf.

Natural Geographic Distribution

The Florida Thatch Palm, *Thrinax radiata*, is indigenous to the extreme southern mainland coast of Florida, the Florida Keys, Bahamas, western Cuba, The Cayman Islands, Jamaica, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the eastern coast of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico and Belize. In nature, this palm almost always grows within the range of salt-laden winds near coastal areas. It grows naturally in sandy or calcareous soils. In Florida, it is an endangered species.

Growth Habit and Morphology

The Florida thatch palm is a slender, solitary, very slow-growing, fan palm. Growth averages no more than 6 inches a year. It may grow to a height of 30 feet, but it is often much smaller. It is adapted to growing in full sun or varying shade. Its canopy is dense and globular in full sun and open and airy under shade. The entire trunk of young specimens are generally shaggy with matted fibers held between old leaf bases. The trunk of many older specimens are matted at the top; the mid and lower trunk is rough and gray; the base often has a mass of tight protruding roots. Trunk diameters are normally 3—5 inches. Typically the Florida Thatch palm produces 12–20 palmate fronds. The fronds are induplicate, circular and slightly folded. The segments are divided about halfway, split and pendant at the tip. Fronds are green above with yellow ribs, lighter green or yellow green beneath. They have a distinct pointed hastula protruding from the frond's center. At maturity the leaf will be 4-5 feet wide on an unarmed petiole of 2-3 feet. The inflorescence is 3 feet long or more and arches downward, sometimes extending beyond the frond. The Florida thatch palm flowers all year but its peak bloom occurs in spring. The bisexual flowers are white. Palms as short as 6 feet will begin flowering. Drupes are seen throughout the year, but are more abundant in the fall. The drupes are about 1/4 inch in diameter and are also white. The white drupes distinguishes the genus *Thrinax* from palms in the closely related *Coccothrinax* genus. The latter group of palms have yellow or black drupes. Another distinguishing feature between both genera is the openly split leaf base of *Thrinax* while entire in *Coccothrinax*. The Florida thatch palm also differs from both the thatch palm (*Leucothrinax morrisii*, syn. *Thrinax morisii*) and the silver palm (*Coccothrinax argentata*) by lacking the silvery white leaf undersurfaces.



Clockwise: The hastula is distinctly pointed; the fronds are circular and divided about half way; the green immature drupes ripen white.



Top photos: The trunks of mature palms are matted at top, smooth in the middle, and often have a mass of exposed roots at the base.

Left: Palms in full sun have a dense globular canopy.

Right: A palm grown in shade has an open and airy canopy.

Planting and Maintenance Guidelines

The Florida thatch palm grows well in the high pH of calcareous material. This material is frequently used for roadway and residential construction in south Florida. It is a relatively cold tolerant species and is able to survive temperatures as low as 26°F. While tolerant of seaside spray it does not take well to being inundated by salt or brackish water. With generally good attributes, the Florida thatch palm is becoming an increasingly common sight along roadways, in parks, yards and wherever there is limited space. It is now widely planted outside its historical range in South Florida and in many islands of the Caribbean. Plant it in a full sun or light to moderate shade. The palm will benefit from decomposing organic matter added to the soil. Except for the oldest of palms, the fronds are persistent. An annual pruning usually takes care of any dead or drooping fronds. Avoid removing fronds above an imaginary 180 degree horizon. The more fronds retained, the fuller the presentation. The Florida thatch palm requires little in the way of fertilizer. Insects are rarely a problem. Currently there are no known cases of infections of the Florida thatch palm by either ganoderma butt rot (*Ganoderma zonatum*) or Lethal Yellowing disease.



From seedlings to skinny giants. The crown is tightly globular and dense when in full sun. The two palms in the bottom right photo are located at the Edison-Ford Winter Estates, Fort Myers, Florida, and are approximately 75 years old.

Propagation

Seed germination is fairly easy during the warm summer months when daytime temperature is approximately 90°F. At that time place the seeds 0.5 inches deep in a community growing media 6 inches deep. Keep the media moist but not soaked. Approximately 90 percent of the seeds should germinate in 8 to 10 weeks. They should be transplanted into a well draining growing media for continued growth. Germination done in the winter will take significantly longer than 10 weeks if the media is not heated.



A group of Florida thatch palms in the city of Fort Myers Beach, Florida.

References

Meerow, Alan W. 2006. *Betrock's Landscape Palms*. Betrock Information Systems, Inc. Hollywood, Florida

Riffle, Robert Lee & Craft, Paul. 2003. *An Encyclopedia of Cultivated Palms*. Timber Press, Inc. Portland, Oregon

This fact sheet was reviewed by Paul Craft, palm aficionado and co-author of 'An Encyclopedia of Cultivated Palms;' Mike Allen, Soaring Eagle Nursery, Bokeelia, Florida; Tim Broschat, Environmental Horticulture, University of Florida, Fort Lauderdale REC; Peggy Cruz, Lee County Extension; Jenny Evans, Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation; and Bob Peterson, Collier County Transportation.

All pictures were taken by Stephen H. Brown.

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