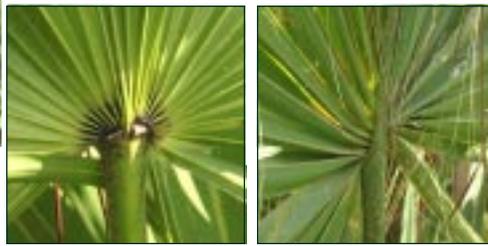


Profile Saw Palmetto *Serenoa repens*



Saw palmetto is an extremely hardy, low, clumping, bushy palm that has large, fan-shaped leaves and multiple trunks that creep along the ground, creating a dense ground cover.

Three-foot-long flower stalks appear in spring, covered with small, yellow-white, fragrant flowers, the source of a commercial high-grade honey.

The flowers are followed by small berries that ripen August through October. These berries are an important food source for many mammals and birds.

Historical use of saw palmetto can be traced in the Americas to the Mayans who used it as a tonic and to the Seminoles who used the berries as an expectorant and antiseptic.

Saw palmetto is found in most of the southeast coastal plain, between Louisiana and Florida in the south, to South Carolina in the north.

It grows on a wide variety of sites, from dry and open to seasonally wet and semi-shady. Across this wide range of habitats, it most frequently occurs on sand ridges, flatwood forests, coastal dunes, and islands near marshes.

Saw palmetto is the dominant ground cover in some pine forests, sometimes covering hundreds of acres.

It often grows in clumps to 20 feet or more in diameter and can grow to ten feet tall.

The stems of the saw palmetto usually remain below ground or run horizontally along the surface while trunks rise from the ground.

Because the stem is mostly at or below the surface of the ground, the plant is protected during wildfires even though the fronds are highly flammable. New flower stalks and fronds emerge one and two weeks immediately following a fire.

The fronds spiral around the stem and are circular in outline, usually two to three feet across. They are deeply divided into many dagger-shaped segments and the stems are sharply saw-toothed, giving it its name. Saw palmetto leaves fan out from a single end of the stalk, *top left*, and can be distinguished from young cabbage palms, *top right*, where the stem runs into the leaves.

Saw palmetto may also be confused with dwarf palmetto (*Sabal minor*) because of their similar sizes and leaf shapes. Dwarf palmetto has blue-green leaves, has no spines on the leaf stems, and the circular fruits are about a half inch in diameter.

Saw palmetto blooms between April and July. Maximum spadix initiation begins after the danger of frost is past and may be stimulated by rising temperatures.

The fruits ripen in September and October. Maximum saw-palmetto growth occurs during the summer rainy season, achieving 80 percent of annual production between April and October.

The fruits ripen from green to black on a branched cluster shorter than the leaves.

Flowering and fruiting are not necessarily annual events, and some years see more abundant flowering than others. Even when flowering is abundant, fruit production is erratic; the causes are unknown.

Black bears, white-tailed deer, raccoons, and feral hogs eat the fruits of saw palmetto. Bears will also eat the

young shoots which sprout after winter fires. Native Americans also used the fruits for food. Today, the fruits are collected for herbal medicines that many believe prevent certain forms of cancer (see below).

The flowers are an important source of honey and clumps of palmetto are often favorite hiding places of rattlesnakes, wasps, and the Florida panther.

Saw palmetto helps provide primary habitat for the other wildlife in southern Florida's palmetto prairies. Distinctive species include the crested caracara, the Florida burrowing owl, and the Florida sandhill crane. As a member of scrub communities, saw-palmetto provides essential habitat for sand skinks, the Florida mouse, and a variety of birds, including the Florida scrub jay, a threatened subspecies.

Early studies on saw palmetto suggested that the plant could ease the



symptoms of benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH), or enlarged prostate. More recent studies done with more reliable methods, however, found that the plant extract was no better at alleviating symptoms than a placebo.

As reported in the *New England Medical Journal* in 2006: "In a double-blind trial, we randomly assigned 225 men over the age of 49

years who had moderate-to-severe symptoms of benign prostatic hyperplasia to one year of treatment with saw palmetto extract (160 mg twice a day) or placebo. ...In this study, saw palmetto did not improve symptoms or objective measures of benign prostatic hyperplasia. (ClinicalTrials.gov number, NCT00037154)."