Uncommon Palms for Central Florida

Palm trees are one of the most commonly used plants in the Florida landscape. Palms are monocots, which belong to the Arecaceae (Palmae) Family. Worldwide, there are over 2000 different species of palms. In Central Florida, around 20 different species are available and commonly planted, but many more will grow well in our subtropical climate. Leu Gardens has over 350 species of palms growing in the collection. These are evaluated for their suitability to our climate. Below are descriptions of 25 underutilized palms that deserve to be used in our local landscapes.

*Allagoptera arenaria* is known as the Seashore Palm. It is native to the dunes of southeastern Brazil and is very drought and salt tolerant. This palm forms clusters, growing 4-6 feet tall. The green leaves are silvery on the undersides. The Seashore Palm needs full sun and well-drained soil. It is an excellent small palm for Central Florida's sandy soil and will thrive in a hot and dry location of the landscape.

*Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*, the Piccabeen or Bangalow Palm, has a fast rate of growth and reaches 30-40 feet tall. It has a fairly slender trunk, grows in sun or shade and requires an evenly moist soil. This palm is native to rainforests in Eastern Australia. It is semi cold sensitive so is best suited to the warmer sections of Central Florida. The King Palm, *Archontophoenix alexandri*, is a similar palm.

*Arenga engleri* is a clustering palm native to Taiwan. It is sometimes called the Clustering Sugar Palm. It forms clumps and can reach 10-12 feet tall. The pinnate leaves are dark green and silvery underneath. The inflorescences of this palm bear extremely fragrant flowers. These are produced in late spring and early summer. The flowers have a peach-mango scent and can perfume a large area. Visitors to the garden never guess that a palm is responsible for such a sweet scent. The Clustering Sugar Palm will grow in sun or shade but looks best with at least afternoon shade. *Arenga ryukyuensis* is a similar palm from the Ryukyu Islands at the southern tip of Japan. It is a smaller palm that only grows 5-6 feet tall.
Beccariophoenix alfredii, the Plateau Palm, is native to central Madagascar. This palm closely resembles a Coconut Palm (Cocos nucifera) and grows 30-40 feet tall. It will grow in sun to moderate shade. This palm is new to cultivation but grows well in Central Florida. It is more cold hardy than a Coconut Palm and can be used for a tropical appearance.

Bismarckia nobilis, is called the Bismarck Palm and is also native to Madagascar. It is a robust palm that grows 30-40 feet tall and is one of the most ornamental of all palms. The large palmate leaves are an intense silvery-blue color and can be 5 - 10 feet across. It likes full sun and well-drained soil. It is very drought tolerant once established. Most Bismarckia Palms grown are the silvery-blue form. There is also a form with green leaves but it is not as cold hardy as the silvery-blue form and is not often sold. Seedlings of the silvery-blue form often have a purplish tinge to them. The more purple coloring as a seedling, the more intensely silvery blue it will be when mature. The seedlings of the green form are green as seedlings. Bismarckia nobilis is slow growing for the first few years then speeds up as it matures. They are almost impossible to transplant until they have developed a trunk, so plant this palm in its permanent location. It has become a very popular palm in central and southern Florida landscapes.

X Butyagrus nabonnandii, the Mule Palm, is a hybrid between two common palms: The Pindo or Jelly Palm (Butia odorata) and the Queen Palm (Syagrus romanzoffian). It has graceful, bright green leaves with a moderately robust trunk though some can be slenderer. Mule Palms grow in sun or light shade. They can have a moderate to fast rate of growth and can reach 20-30 feet tall.

Chamaedorea microspadix is a species of Bamboo Palm. It is a clustering species with slender stems that resemble bamboo. The clumps grow 6-8 feet tall. It also produces bright red fruit several times a year. This colorful fruit contrasts nicely against the dark green leaves and stems. Chamaedorea microspadix needs shade and moist soil. It is native to eastern Mexico.

Chrysalidocarpus decaryi, the Triangle Palm, is a very ornamental palm but has become widely available. The upright, arching leaves are arranged in 3 ranks giving the palm its common name. This palm likes full sun or partial shade. It is semi drought tolerant but looks and grows best with adequate moisture. It grows 20-25 feet tall and is native to southern Madagascar. It was formerly known as Dypsis decaryi.

Chrysalidocarpus pembanus, the Pemba Palm, is native to Pemba Island off the coast of Tanzania in Africa. It forms open clumps with slender, ringed stems that look like bamboo and can be

Chrysalidocarpus leptochelios is known as the Teddy Bear Palm. It grows 20-30 feet tall with a slender, ringed trunk. The upper portions of the trunk are green and covered in a white powder. The crownshaft has soft, reddish brown hairs. This palm likes full sun or light shade with evenly moist soil. It is native to northwestern Madagascar. It was formerly known as Dypsis leptochelios.

Chrysalidocarpus pembanus, the Pemba Palm, is native to Pemba Island off the coast of Tanzania in Africa. It forms open clumps with slender, ringed stems that look like bamboo and can
grow 15-20 feet tall. This palm grows in sun or shade with evenly moist soil. It is cold sensitive and grows best in the warmer areas of Central Florida. It is a good palm for courtyards or close to buildings. The Pemba Palm was formerly known as *Dypsis pemba*.

*Coccothrinax argentata* is a small palm native to southern Florida, the Bahamas, the West Indies and southern Mexico. It is often called the Silver Thatch Palm. It is slow growing with a very slender trunk reaching 10-20 feet tall. The small, palmate leaves are glossy green on the upper surfaces and a nice silver color underneath. This palm needs full sun or light shade. It is very drought and salt tolerant and also tolerant of alkaline soils. It grows well in the protected areas of Central Florida and is a great palm for small landscapes.

*Copernicia alba*, the Caranday Palm, has a slender trunk and can reach 20-30 feet tall. The palmate leaves are silvery colored. This palm needs full sun. It is drought tolerant but can also grow in wet or seasonally flooded soil. The Caranday Palm is native from southern Brazil to northern Argentina and Bolivia. A very similar palm is *Copernicia prunifera*, the Carnauba Wax Palm from Brazil. The leaves of this palm are covered in a thick layer of wax and are the source of the famous carnauba wax. The leaves of *Copernica alba* also have a layer of wax and is the source of the inferior caranday wax.

*Howea forsteriana* is commonly called the Kentia Palm. It has been commonly grown as a houseplant since Victorian times but will grow well outdoors in the warmer parts of Central Florida. It has very dark green pinnate leaves. The Kentia Palm needs shade and a moist soil. It can reach 20-25 feet tall but is slow growing. *Howea forsteriana* is native to Lord Howe Island off the east coast of Australia. This is an excellent, tropical looking palm for protected locations in the landscape.

*Leucothrinax morrisii* is known as the Key Thatch Palm. It grows wild in the Florida Keys and also other Caribbean islands. The palmate leaves are a pale blue green color with whitish undersides. It is slow growing and reaches 10-15 feet tall. It needs full sun or partial shade. It is also very drought, salt and alkaline soil tolerant. This is another good, low maintenance palm for smaller urban landscapes in the warmer sections of Central Florida. The Key Thatch Palm was formerly known as *Thrinax morrisii*.

*Licuala ramsayi*, the Pinwheel Palm, is an unusual palm native to tropical rainforests in northeastern Australia. Despite its tropical origins it can tolerate some cold and grows very well in protected microclimates of Central Florida. The bright green, palmate leaves are circular and divided into blunt segments. It likes shade with a moist soil. This palm is slow growing and can grow 10-20 feet though very old specimens in habitat are much taller. *Licuala spinosus*, the Spiny Licuala Palm from southeast Asia, has similar leaves but forms clumps 10-15 feet tall with thin trunks. Another very ornamental species is *Licuala peltata* var. *sumawongii* from southern Thailand. The leaves on this palm are also circular but remain undivided. The palm is slow and grows 8-12 feet tall. It also needs moist soil and shade.

*Livistona decora*, the Ribbon Palm, is native to eastern Australia and was until recently known as *Livistona decipiens*. It is a fast growing palm reaching 30-40 feet tall. The palmate leaves are very deeply divided into long, thin segments giving the palm a weeping look. It is very drought tolerant once established. The Ribbon Palm is a good substitute for the common *Washingtonia robusta*, Mexican Fan Palm, as it does not grow as tall. This makes it suited for smaller scaled landscapes. The shorter height also makes it much less susceptible to a lightning strike, which is usually the most common cause of death of *Washingtonia robusta* in Central Florida.

*Livistona nitida* is known as the Carnarvon Palm. It is native to southeastern Queensland, Australia and grows 30-40 feet tall. The leaves
are a shiny green with weeping leaflets. Young plants are slow growing but become faster as they mature. It will grow in sun or light shade and is drought tolerant though it grows best with moist soil.

*Livistona saribus* is the Taraw Palm. It is native to southeastern Asia and can grow 30 to 50 feet tall. This palm has large leaves that are deeply segmented. The petioles are armed with large attractive spines that resemble shark teeth. Taraw Palm also has fruit that is a glossy blue color. This palm will grow in sun or shade and needs moist soil. It can also grow in periodically flooded locations or in wet, mucky soil.

*Phoenix loureiroi* is called the Mountain Date Palm. It will grow in sun or light shade and is drought tolerant. This palm only grows 10-20 feet tall. It usually has a single trunk, but clustering forms exist. It is native to from northern India to southern China, Taiwan, and the Philippines.

*Phoenix rupicola*, the Cliff Date Palm, is native to India where it grows on hillsides. It is a slender palm that reaches 25 feet tall. The leaves are dark green. The Cliff Date Palm is the most graceful of all the Date Palms and makes an excellent specimen. It will grow in sun or light shade and is fairly drought tolerant but looks best with moist soil.

*Rhapis multifida* is a less common species of Lady Palm native to southern China. This is a clumping palm with thin, bamboo-like stems that grows 6-8 feet tall. It requires shade with a moist soil. The foliage is a brighter green than the common Lady Palm (*Rhapis excelsa*) and more finely divided.

*Roystonea regia* is the famous Royal Palm that is very common in South Florida. It grows well in the warmer, metro areas of Central Florida. This is a very large palm that can grow 50-70 feet tall with a thick whitish gray trunk. The trunk is topped by a prominent bright green crownshaft. Because of it’s size, this palm needs room in the landscape and should not be planted close to smaller houses. It needs full sun or light shade with a moist soil. This species of Royal Palm is native to southern Florida, Cuba, some Caribbean Islands and southeastern Mexico.

*Sabal cauisiarum* is native to Puerto Rico and southern Hispaniola and is called the Hat Palmetto. It is a large growing palm that can reach 30-50 feet tall. The trunks are very thick and robust and resemble columns. It is slow growing when young but the rate increases as it matures. It likes full sun and is drought tolerant. *Sabal domingensis*, the Dominican Palmetto, is similar. It is native to Hispaniola and eastern Cuba.

*Sabal minor* is a dwarf palm that only grows 3-5 feet tall. It resembles a juvenile Cabbage Palm (*Sabal palmetto*) but with flatter leaves. It is known as the Dwarf Palmetto and is native to southeastern United States including north and central Florida. It grows in sun or shade. It is semi drought tolerant but grows better in moist to wet locations. **Scrub Palmetto** (*Sabal etonia*) is a similar dwarf palm native to peninsular Florida. It grows naturally in scrub habitat so needs full sun with a well drained soil. It is very drought tolerant.

*Wodyetia bifurcata*, the Foxtail Palm, is native to a small range in northeastern Australia. Young specimens have a slender trunk but they get more robust as they mature and can grow 20-30 feet tall. The Foxtail Palm has pinnate leaves that are densely plumose. They like full sun or light shade with an evenly moist and fertile soil. Foxtail Palms are cold sensitive and grow best in the warmer areas of Central Florida.