The Cabbage Palm

One native Southeastern US palm tree is a common sight around the state of Florida and has served us well throughout history. The Cabbage Palm (Sabal palmetto) was adopted as our official state tree in 1953. In 1970, the Florida legislature decided to replace the cocoa palm on the state seal with this reliable and lovely cabbage palm.

One reason for being a favorite tree of Floridians is its ability to withstand the tropical storms and hurricane force winds. Additionally, this tough tree is amazingly resistant to fire, floods, drought, salt spray and cold temperatures. Hardy in zones 8a through 11, cabbage palms have withstood short durations of temperatures as low as 7 degrees.

In the landscape, this palm will reach heights up to 30 feet. Trees in the wild usually attain much loftier heights. The spread of the crown is usually small, from 10 to 15 feet wide when grown in the full sun. In part shade, however, the crown will grow much wider.

The trunks are often an identifying feature, but even that can be confusing. The base or ‘boot’ of an old leaf stays attached to the trunk when the leaf falls. This creates a criss-cross pattern on the trunk. Some trees will eventually lose the ‘boots’ and become smooth as they mature, but not always. Trees that retain their ‘boots’ may collect organic matter in the crevices and support other plants such as ferns and bromeliads.

The terminal bud, or ‘palm heart’, resembles the bud tissue of cabbage or artichoke hearts, and was historically used by Native Americans as a food source. Occasionally you may still find the rather intriguing menu item ‘hearts of palm’ salad. Palms have only one bud which is located in the crown where the leaves originate. The palm dies when the terminal bud is removed because no new leaves can grow to replace old ones.

In mid-summer, creamy white clusters of fragrant flowers droop from the crown on 4 to 5 foot stalks. Many wildlife species await the shiny black fruits that develop and mature in the fall. If used for food in wildlife habitats, several good companion plants to use are wax myrtle, yaupon and dahoon holly, and rabbiteye blueberry.

For more information on palms, go to www.solutionsforyourlife.com.