

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

Sabal Palm (*Sabal palmetto*)

Sabal Palm is the Florida State Tree. It was often referred to as the “tree of life” by Native Americans, because it provided food, shelter, and clothing.

In mid-summer sabal palms bear clusters of individually small, creamy white flowers borne in conspicuous, long-stalked, often drooping clusters held completely within the crown. Throughout the preserve sabal palms are currently in full bloom, full of fragrance and full of bees. As you can see in the photo to the left, the flowers are very small on the long stems—just compare the small flowers to the size of the bee in the photo. The nectar is a good source for bees as well as butterflies.



The black berries which follow flowering are a critical food source for a variety of birds and small mammals. The berries are edible with a sweet taste like prunes—and similar effects for humans. Berries have a single seed. Indigenous people gathered and ground dried seeds into meal to make bread. This was referred to as a famine food and usually eaten when other foods were not available. Dried seeds were easily transported and had a long shelf life. Early indigenous people and later settlers were known to harvest the large leaf buds from the top of this plant. It is said to have the look and taste of cabbage and that is why it is also called cabbage palm; however, removing this bud kills the tree and should not be attempted today. Many other uses of this tree are documented such as: pilings for wharfs, because they resist attacks by seaworms; vessels for carrying water, made from hollowed out trunks; table tops from polished trunk cross-sections; scrub brushes from the bark fibers and leaf sheaths; and logs for cribbing in early fortifications because they did not produce lethal splinters when struck by cannonballs. Fish nets and clothing were made from fibers found on leaves and in the leaf bases (boots).



Age and growth rates of sabal palm have been studied by the University of Florida, and preliminary results indicate some startling news: under average conditions in the wild, plants require ten to fifteen years or more from seed to the first sign of a trunk at ground level; thereafter, trunks will grow about six inches per year. This means that a sabal palm with 20 feet of trunk is at least 50 years old! These trees may get over 65 feet tall. This palm actually obtains most of its girth before it starts its main growth upward. The sabal palm is remarkably resistant to fire, floods, coastal conditions, cold, high winds and drought.

Organic debris often collects in the leaf bases (boots). It is not uncommon to see a sabal palm transformed into a hanging garden of ferns and other plants. The boots play host to many interesting species like golden polypody ferns, orchids, ball moss, resurrection ferns, and strangler fig. The boots will drop off naturally because of weathering or wear from animals climbing up and down over time. Landscapers will often strip the boots from the trees in residential areas to help prevent the trees from harboring critters near homes. Green fronds are the palm's source of nutrients. Cutting green fronds stunts growth, invites disease, and reduces the palm's natural resilience to high winds. Harsh pruning takes away food and shelter from native and migratory songbirds, woodpeckers, butterflies, honey bees, tree frogs, bats, anoles, squirrels, and other wildlife.



Trivia Note: Florida was and is still known for being a large cattle producing state. Back in the early ranching days, cowboys would use a leaf base from an old frond to help pull their boots off. Could this be why the leaf base is called a “boot”?