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News Release

PALMS

Question: I recently moved here from Florida and I miss having palms in the landscape. Can any palms be grown in this area?

Answer: Palms and their “look a likes,” the cycads, are beautiful plants that can add a tropical look to the landscape. We are certainly not in the right climate to grow a wide variety of palms outdoors, but there are a few of the hardy palms and cycads that the adventurous gardener may want to try. This is the time of year to find a good selection at local nurseries.

Needle palms are considered the cold hardiest of the palms. A well established plant could take short periods of near 0 degrees F. Needle palms are an understory palm with a natural clumping habit but could also be grown as a specimen plant. The clump will reach about 5 to 10 feet high and about that same width. The best sight would have some shade especially in the afternoon and good well drained but moist soil.

Windmill palms or Chinese windmill palms are slightly less but still very cold hardy specimen plants. These palms have a single trunk with fan shaped leaves similar to those found on the needle palms. If you see fairly large palms this far north it is likely this palm. The growth rate is fairly rapid growing up to two feet per season. Like most palms, it should be in a well drained soil and supplied with plenty of moisture. If well established and acclimated, the Windmill Palm will tolerate temperatures down to about 5 degrees.

Dwarf palmetto is another hardy palm that looks like it has a clumping growth but it does have a very short trunk that may be hidden near or under the soil line. It is smaller than the needle palm and has fan shaped foliage that may be green to a bluish-gray. Dwarf palmettos will get about 4 feet high and they grow rather slow. With a little winter protection they would survive most winters in this area. They could be grown in a container and moved into an unheated area for the winter because they are difficult to transplant. Because of this difficulty they would not fair well to dig and store each year.

The Pindo Palm or the Jelly Palm can tolerate temperatures slightly below 15 degrees if it is well acclimated. It is the most common exotic palm grown in the Southeast. The Pindo Palm has feathery foliage that is gray to blue-green and the fronds are often 6 to 8 feet long. This palm would likely require winter protection in most years and will survive in

extreme drought once established. There are some nice ones at Aldridge Gardens that I saw last week that fared well in our rather cold winter this year.

Cycads look very similar to palms. The type most grown in our area is actually called sago palm. Palms all produce fruit of some sort, but cycads produce cones. Sago “palms” are evergreen with stiff fronds that radiate out from a slow growing trunk. You can grow a 3 to 5 foot plant in a few years if you have a large enough pot but you may need to move it in to an unheated garage or your house during the winter. Sago “palms” are very versatile and will do well in sun or shade. They are short and stocky and will take a lot of wind abuse and still look very good.

Most of the other palms are more suitable for summer use only in containers around the pool or patio. If you want to enjoy them for more than one year you will need a large sun room to overwinter them.

No matter which palms you choose you need to fertilize them regularly. Palms can often become deficient in nitrogen, potassium, magnesium (Epsom salt), and manganese. Check your fertilizer bag or bottle to see if it contains micronutrients, or buy one of the special palm formulations if you can find it.

For more information on this topic or other horticulture related questions, please contact Regional Extension Agent Tony Glover at the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416 or email gloveta@aces.edu. You can also check out the following web addresses: www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/landscape/trees/hgic1019.html or www.cas.muohio.edu/coldhardypalms/