Saw Palmetto

(Serenoa repens)

By ***Fred Nation***

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Saw palmetto is a distinctive understory shrub in the pinelands and other forested habitats of coastal Alabama. Our largest populations are seen in the dry, sandy soils of Baldwin and Mobile Counties, where dense colonial thickets sometimes cover several acres. Elsewhere in the state, *Serenoa repens* is mostly restricted to the southern tier of counties, along the border with the Florida panhandle.

The leaves are large, to three feet across, palmately compound, nearly circular in overall outline, with about 30 linear segments that radiate outward from the center. Leaf stems are two to three feet long, with two marginal rows of sharp, stiff, curved serrations. These saw-teeth are distinctive, and can be used to distinguish saw palmetto from our two other native palms: bluestem palmetto, *Sabal minor*, and the rare needle palm, *Rhapidophyllum hystrix*.

The shaggy trunk of saw palmetto usually runs along the ground, just beneath the surface, sometimes partially exposed. In old individuals it can easily grow to several yards in length. Historically the trunks were collected as a source of tannin, for use as a dye mordant, and to tan leather.

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The flowers are small, fragrant, creamy white, in large inflorescences in late spring. They are eagerly sought by honeybees for their nectar which produces excellent, mild-flavored honey. The fruits are nearly black in color, oval, to about one inch long, with a single large pit. They provide food for many wildlife species, including black bears. They are ill-scented and appear to be unpalatable, but historical reports indicate that palmetto fruits were occasionally gathered for human consumption by Native Americans and early European settlers along the gulf coast. Fruit extracts are currently refined for medical use, as an effective modern treatment for prostate inflammation and enlargement.

Saw palmetto is an important fire-adapted member of our fire-dependent, forested coastal plain ecosystems. The tough, stringy roots hold soils to help prevent erosion, and the large leaves and dense growth habit quickly regenerate after fires to provide excellent wildlife cover. Loggers and turpentiners have always given palmetto thickets a wide berth for their well-justified reputation as shady havens for eastern diamondback and timber rattlesnakes.

In recent years landscapers and plant growers have recognized saw palmetto as a dramatic, drought-resistant specimen plant, particularly suited to dry, sunny, sandy landscapes throughout the state. *Serenoa repens* is now widely available as container-grown stock at nurseries and garden centers.

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