GROWING PALMS

AND PALM LIKE PLANTS

BY JOHN MASON

CONTENTS

CREDITS 3

PREFACE 4

CHAPTER 1 GROWING PALMS AND CYCADS 5

Simple cultural requirements 6

Common problems with indoor and outdoor palms 6

Some Australian native palms 7

Palms for special situations 9

Cold climates 9

Palms for shade 13

Palms for either sun or shade 15

Palms for dry, cool climates 18

Palms for coastal areas 20

Palms for indoors 23

CHAPTER 2 PALM GENERA 25

CHAPTER 3 CYCADS 52

Cycad genera 53

CHAPTER 4 OTHER PALM LIKE PLANTS 64

APPENDIX 67

Distance learning and online courses 67

Videos 68

E books by John Mason and ACS staff 68

Printed books by John Mason 69

USEFUL CONTACTS 70

ACS global partners 70

Social media 70

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PREFACE

Palms and Cycads are commonly thought of as either tropical or indoor plants; and while many come from warmer climates and are often grown indoors; this is not really a true assumption.

These plants occur naturally across a wide range of climates, both temperate and tropical and from wet rainforests to arid deserts.

This book explores the diversity of species, the differences in appearance, and the way in which different species might be cultivated.

CHAPTER 1 GROWING PALMS AND CYCADS

Swaying palms evoke thoughts of the tropics, but they can be grown over a much wider areas; there are palms suited to cool temperate regions and cool mountainous areas, some will even withstand frosts. Some palms can of course also be grown as indoor plants, so the tropical feel can be extended to the living room and balcony.

At first glance all palms might look the same; a closer look however will highlight significant differences between one variety and the next. Trunks can be smooth, ridged or even prickly, with the dead bases of old fronds either clinging to the trunk or completely removed. Fronds can be large of small, fan shaped or feather like (deeply divided like a fern leaf).

Foliage and trunk colour can vary also, and though most palms have mainly green foliage with shades of green, brown or grey in the trunk, there are species with shades of red, yellow, white and other colours.

The large fan or feather-like fronds can provide an excellent contrast to smaller leaved plants. As they grow, their shade gives a dappled effect to understorey plants, providing an excellent growing environment.

The trunks may be a main feature or they can be used as a host support for epiphytic plants such as orchids, ferns (elkhorns and staghorns) and climbing philodendrons.

With such a huge range available, anyone can create that wonderful, tropical, relaxing effect, of swaying palms and rustling foliage, as the wind gently blows through the fronds.

Encephalartos altensteinii

SIMPLE CULTURAL REQUIREMENTS

Most palms, except the drier inland species, require moist soil conditions with good drainage. The soil should not be allowed to dry out totally. Palms, especially those from rainforests, can handle the occasional short waterlogged period. The soil is best if slightly acid – pH 6.0 to 6.5 – though palms can handle a wide range of soils from clay to sand.

Being hungry feeders, compost enriched soil or fertilizers may be needed. High nitrogen fertilizers with an N-P-K ratio of 10-3-6 are regarded as the best and should be applied in spring, summer and early autumn at a rate of about 3 to 5 kg per square metre.

If older fronds become yellow, this indicates a nitrogen deficiency which can be corrected with fertilizers such as Sulphate of Ammonia. Dead fronds are frequently removed to keep palms looking tidy and to prevent them dropping onto people, cars and so on. If fronds are cut back while still green though, this can set the plants back and slow growth. Because their trunks are so flexible and bend in the wind, tall palms are less likely to blow over in a strong wind than a similar size woody tree.

COMMON PROBLEMS WITH INDOOR AND OUTDOOR PALMS

Tips turn brown

Low humidity is a possible cause of tips turning brown. There are a number of solutions, depending on the position of the palm is in. It might involve simply moving a palm away from a heater or air conditioner, or out of direct sunlight. You could try replacing the palm with a hardier species otherwise give it a spell in a greenhouse, if you have one. Try spraying the fronds several times daily with a fine water mist.

Foliage dying back - starting at tips and spreading

This is usually the result of over or under-watering. You should check the soil in pots before watering; make sure it has not become hydrophobic (air dry and water repellent). Reduce watering in winter and increase it during summer. Dry in-ground plants should be mulched - after first soaking the soil and checking for water repellence (this can be adjusted with a soil wetting agent). For in ground plants sitting in over-wet soils – adjust soil drainage by spiking the soil or draining water to a lower area.

Yellow foliage

The plant could either be too wet, lacking nutrients or be pot bound. If the plant is in a pot, pot up into a larger container using good quality potting mix. If it's in the ground, dig or install drainage. If drainage is good you may need to add fertiliser to the soil – make sure you wet the soil thoroughly before and after application (to prevent root burn).

Sticky foliage or black 'soot'

This is caused by scale or other insects. Spray/wash all the foliage with soapy water or apply Disyston granules to the roots.