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Care Sheet for Sabal minor or "Dwarf Palmetto" in Virginia Landscapes

Fact and Care Sheet for Virginia Gardens

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Introduction

Native to the Southern United States, the Sabal minor or Dwarf Palmetto is a smaller and much shorter cousin to the familiar Sabal palmetto that lines the streets and palisades of cities in the Deep South, where the fronds were once cut to make ladies' hand fans. Part of the Dwarf Palmetto's native range includes the extreme southeastern portion of Virginia. As a result, S. minor is one of the most cold-hardy palms that can be grown in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

S. minor features evergreen, deep blue-green fanlike fronds of one to three feet in length, depending on the age of the plant. A shrubby, clumping palm, it may form short trunks of one to three feet after many years of growth. At maturity, S. minor can range from six to eight feet tall and wide.

Many specimens have endured Zone 7 and lower winter temperatures and being covered in thick ice and deep snow with little or no damage. Given the proper conditions and period of establishment, S. minor should be hardy throughout all Virginia zone to 6. (See Resources, below, to determine your USDA Zone.)

In the Landscape

S. minor is ideal as an understory palm for larger trunking palms like the Windmill Palm (*Trachycarpus fortunei*) or the *S. palmetto*, as well as temperate trees such as Crapemyrtle or dogwood. You can also use *S. minor* as a focal point or specimen planting or in groups to create the classic formal groupings often seen in the Deep South. Entrance planting beds near office buildings or housing communities are also ideal spots for *S. minor*. The plant lends an attractive, tropical look in summer with the benefit of evergreen interest in the winter and the economy afforded by a hardy shrub.

Figure 1 A Sabal minor palm, located in Sterling, Virginia, pushing up a flowering stalk. Photo Credit: J. Seamone.

One advantage *S. minor* has over some of the other palms that may be considered for planting in Virginia is its ability to grow a deep subterranean trunk (up to 5 feet deep) that keeps many of its vital parts below the frost line in winter and helps it to endure long hot periods of drought in summer. As a result, large, established *S. minor* can be difficult to remove permanently. Keep this in mind when planting this palm.

Planting and Care

S.minor will tolerate a wide range of soil textures, from almost pure sand to red clay. It can also stand "wet feet" (roots in standing water) from time to time. In the wild, it grows in everything from coastal swamps to mountain slopes. *S.minor* tolerates a wide range of pHs from acid bog soils to limestone or coastal soils. In the garden, you can plant this palm in virtually any soil conditions that are encountered in Virginia.

Like most palms, *S. minor* appreciates soils that are rich in manganese and magnesium, and a soil test will allow you to determine if additional fertilizer is needed. Contact your local Extension office for a soil test kit and fertilizer recommendations. Most palms are not fast growers, and the grower's goal is to provide conditions for good, steady growth throughout the growing season. This will allow the plant foliage to harden off in the fall. Fertilize early with a well-balanced and palm-specific product (usually containing proper amounts of magnesium, calcium, and micronutrients), if available and recommended. Do not apply additional fertilizer after July 4 to avoid excessive young growth that may be unable to harden off sufficiently for winter.

In clay soils, adding organic matter is often recommended. However, be careful not to create a clay-edged "planting pocket" of enriched soil because the plant roots may tend to stay only within this pocket and not extend beyond the pocket. Planting pockets also create the risk of drowning a plant because water can pond at the bottom of the pocket, where water takes longer to drain into the clay. Gardeners should focus on enriching and digging out a wide area within the bed, paying attention to sloping the hole or building up the bed, if possible, to "create" drainage in the root zone.

Good mulch and water are essential during the first two growing seasons. Prune any fronds that are more than 50 percent brown or are dead.

Microclimate and Siting

S.minor does best when planted in a sunny microclimate that provides protection from winter winds. It does best in full sun but will also grow in light shade.

Ecotypes

Several "ecotypes," or genetically distinct varieties of *S. minor* that have adapted to a particular environment exist. *S.minor* 'McCurtain', for example, originated in McCurtain County, Oklahoma, where the palm grows wild in local forests, surviving the winters without any intervention from the human hand. It is one of the hardiest ecotypes of *S. minor* and worth pursuing for the Virginia garden.

Similarly, *S. minor* 'Emerald Isle Blue Giant,' originating in North Carolina, is reliably hardy to at least Zone 7. *S.minor* 'Arkansas' from western Arkansas should be hardy throughout most of Virginia. *S. minor ssp. Louisiana* is not very winter hardy in most Virginia locations, unless acclimatized over many years and in a good microclimate.

Winter Care

Even the most cold-hardy palm species can benefit from some extra attention during Virginia's coldest, wettest winter months. Winter damage on palms can range from mild to severe burn on frond tips or margins to browning of one or more fronds.

While this damage will not kill a palm, it certainly sets the plant back, making it more vulnerable to disease and less attractive in the spring garden. In the most severe cases, damage or disease can settle into the crown, from which the newest frond, or "spear" will emerge.

Figure 2 The large blue green fronds of Sabal minor are evergreen and look great all year long, even in the dead of winter. Photo Credit: J. Seamone.

The spear is an important indicator of the health of a palm. Examine it on a regular basis, especially on new plantings. Give a firm tug to yellowed or spotted spears, and if the spear pulls from the crown, the plant may have a fungal infection and may need treatment with an appropriate fungicide. Contact your local Extension office for recommendations. However, palms are monocots and have only one apical meristem located in the crown. Significant damage to the apical meristem usually results in the death of the palm, and the spear leaf is connected just below the bud (apical meristem).

Figure 3 The large blue green fronds of Sabal minor are evergreen and look great all yar long, even in the dead of winter. Photo Credit: J. Seamone.

As with many plants, providing a heavy mulch to retain moisture and regulate soil temperatures will help young plantings of *S. minor* during the winter. You can also use frost cloth to reduce windburn and keep the crown area dry.

Cover small or seedling sized palms with pine straw, wood mulch or shredded leaves for the winter months, removing the excess in the spring. Protection is not typically needed after the second season of growing *S. minor* in the ground, as the roots will have established themselves enough to allow for water, sugar and carbohydrate transfer to the fronds in cold weather.

Additional Resources

Palm enthusiasts can find The Virginia Palm Society on Facebook under Virginia Palm & Delmarva Palm Societies & other Exotics (https://www.facebook.com/groups/135150320200/); Email questions to bocajoe@comcast.net.

Ralph and Kathy Denton of Pungo Palms Nursery in Virginia Beach specialize in rare and hardy palm trees, cold hardy cactus, and hardy sub-tropical plants. Their contact info: Pungo Palms Nursery, 1201 N Muddy Creek Rd, Virginia Beach, VA 23456-4133; 757-426-3677.

Sean McFall of Chilly Palm Tree Co. (www.chillypalmtree.com) raises cold-hardy palms near Charlotte, NC as well as Kershaw South Carolina. This site contains valuable planting and care information as well as insights from this nursery and client experience in various USDA zones. Sean can be reached at 704-527-8478.

Often cited as the “Bible” of temperate tropical gardeners, *Palms Won’t Grow Here (and other myths)* by David Francko (2003 Timber Press) is a thorough and engaging discussion of palm and tropical research conducted by Francko at Miami University of Ohio.

To determine your USDA Hardiness Zone, use this map: http://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/PHZMWeb/

Other recommended books

Betrock's Cold Hardy Palms, Alan Meerow, Betrock Information System, 2005.

Hardy Palms for the Southeast, Tom McClendon, Will Roberds and Joe LeVert, Southeastern Palm Society. 2007; http://www.sepalms.org/

Authors

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