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## Palms of South Florida by George B. Stevenson

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## REVIEW

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**Palms of South Florida.**—George B. Stevenson. 1996. Gainesville, Florida, University Press of Florida. ISBN 0-8130-1441-7. \$19.95.—The image of south Florida would never be complete without the requisite palms leaning over sunny beaches (on the post-cards, anyway), reaching out of the canopies of hammocks and swamps, or standing sentinel over our urban landscapes. For those who have ever wanted to know what they are, where they came from and even a bit about how to grow them, George B. Stevenson's **Palms of South Florida** provides a concise and useful reference.

With the recent re-issue of **Palms of South Florida**, the identification, classification, and horticultural temperaments of palms cultivated in subtropical lands has once again become accessible to the general public. For those with or without advanced taxonomic or even botanical knowledge, this book offers an easy and accurate summary of horticultural palms found in south Florida. Even if you know your Latin but don't feel up to trudging through a complicated key to species when your neighbor inquires about their diseased landscaping trees, this book offers a quick breakdown based on easily observable characters. Moreover, Stevenson writes as if he's taking you on a plant-walk around the block, presenting information in an easy-to-grasp manner. Mr. Stevenson is the first to point out that this book addresses the call for a way to discuss palms "intelligently, in standard English". It is not a technical taxonomic treatise on the inter-relationships of palms; it was not meant to be. Its purpose is something of a horticultural field guide and it meets this task well. Based on his observations largely from Fairchild Tropical Garden, the center and source for horticultural palm diversity in Florida, Stevenson covers all the most commonly grown species and even species that are only rarely encountered. A helpful two-page summary of the ten most common species is included at the front as "Beginners Pages", a nice introduction to the bulk of our horticultural species.

His framework begins with broad, artificial groups based on conspicuous leaf traits. These are separated in the Preliminary Key with descriptions, in layman's terms, which form the basis for these groupings (e.g., palmate, where "leaf segments radiate from a central point, as in the palm of a hand" versus pinnate, where leaflets are spaced along the leaf axis "as in a feather"). The groups are broken down further by a continuing hierarchy of user-friendly dichotomous keys to genus and species. One potentially frustrating limitation of the keys is that the corresponding illustrations are not labeled. Although a series of drawings corresponding to the characters in the keys occur on the facing pages, the ordering is unclear so the whole page must be searched for the image described in the key. Fortunately, Stevenson does a remarkable job of making the character states discrete and easily understood, so the illustrations mostly serve to boost one's decision-making confidence.

With patience and the very helpful glossary and the rough sketches (which get the point across but are by no means masterful) contained throughout, one can soon find a complete description and illustrations of an unknown palm. Most of the book is comprised of these descriptions, written in a conversational tone, combining important field characters with horticultural notes and tidbits of general interest. His writing style is reminiscent of the flowery days of descriptive botany, when workers' enthusiasm for their focus was mirrored in their generous and respectful attitudes toward their subjects. For a person trained on modern field manuals, where a whole sentence is a rarity and a word like "graceful" is reserved only for slide-shows, I found his completeness refreshing.

The last sections of the book include small segments on species not recommended for growing in Florida, additional species that may tolerate our climate, but that may not be

easy to acquire, the botany and classification of palms (based on Moore's 1961 system), palm geography, Florida's horticultural zones, palm care including discussions on nutritional requirements and the parasites and diseases of palms, salt tolerance of palms, species well-suited for container gardening, a very handy pronunciation guide, and indexes of both the scientific and common names. Most of these sections are brief but informative. The exception is the Palm Botany section which goes into some depth on classification, morphology and development, providing a concise summary of familial characteristics.

Overall, I can strongly recommend this book for anyone interested in learning about palms in south Florida, with the reminder that the book is intended primarily for horticultural species. My only hesitation is that native species are not emphasized for their unique charms and obvious suitability for growing in Florida. Nonetheless, the book should make a welcome addition to any personal or institutional collection as a useful reference.—**Rebecca Yahr**, Archbold Biological Station, PO Box 2057, Lake Placid, Florida 33862.