

Two Different "Non-Palms" to Grow

By Ralph E. Mitchell

There are two different plants that I choose to write about this week that I hope will be of interest to all gardeners. Although they resemble palms to a degree, they are not actually palms at all. One, the Ponytail Palm, is probably as familiar a plant as African violets to many gardeners - I've had several in my lifetime. The other plant is a bit more unusual, and while it does grow in several areas in Charlotte County, the Screw-Pine or Screw Palm, is probably a less recognized plant subject. Irregardless, both the Ponytail Palm and the Screw-Pine are interesting and fairly easy to grow in the landscape or in containers.

As mentioned earlier, the Ponytail palm is not a true palm. In fact it is more closely related to succulents in the Agave family. Often available as a small container plant, the slow-growing Ponytail can potentially develop into a thirty foot tall specimen. Be assured however that the ponytail palm is more commonly found maturing at around ten feet in our area. This is an attractive plant which develops a tapered trunk and swollen base with strap-like leaves at the tips of the branches resembling ponytails. Mature specimens will produce yellow flowers up to three times a year; mostly in the spring or summer. Keep your ponytail in full sun to part shade in a well-drained area. Poor drainage sites can result in root rots. Keep in mind also that, while this plant is only moderately salt tolerant, it is very drought tolerant. If you move your plant from a more shaded condition to a sunnier location, adjust it slowly as sunburn can occur. Remember that the ponytail palm can make an excellent container plant that may grow into a sizable specimen and a conversation piece. Ponytails can also be part of the landscape where they often develop into spectacular multi-branched specimens. Listed for Hardiness Zone 10 A, the ponytail is best planted in spots such as warmer micro-climates or in landscapes closer to the coast. If you want to grow your own ponytails, you must use seed which is usually obtained from the plants' native country of Mexico.

For something in the same vein as ponytail palms, but a little different, there is the Screw-pine or Screw-palm. Named after its nature of growing a spiral twist of strap-like leaves, this plant develops multiple branches with a trunk complete with large brace-roots to support the twenty-five foot tall, fifteen-foot wide mature growth. The leaves are bluish-green and edged with red spines. The overall appearance is that of an open, irregular pyramid making it a very exotic tree. To add to the exotic appearance, the Screw-palm also produces fragrant flowers on the male plant and gigantic fruit on the female plant. The fruit looks like a nine-inch round green pineapple that turns yellow when ripe. The large fruit and regular leaf drop can make this plant a bit messy. There is also a fruit-less white-banded and a golden-banded species available. You can start your own by seed, division or cuttings. Best planted in warmer parts of our county, the Screw-palm is very salt spray tolerant.

For more information on plants to grow in Southwest Florida, please call our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 764-4340.

Resources:

Gilman, E. F. & Watson, D. G. (2003) *Beaucarnea recurvata*: Ponytail. The University of Florida Extension Service, IFAS.

Gilman, E. F. & Watson, D. G. (2003) *Pandanus utilis*: Screw-Pine. The University of Florida Extension Service, IFAS.