

## DWARF PALMETTO

*Sabal minor* (Jacq.) Pers.

Plant Symbol = SAMI8

Contributed by: USDA NRCS National Plant Data Center & the Biota of North America Program



### Alternate Names

Bluestem, scrub palmetto, bush palmetto.

### Uses

#### *Ethnobotanic:*

The Houma used juice crushed from the small roots as an eye medicine to relieve irritation. Dried roots were taken for high blood pressure. A tea from the dried roots was taken for kidney ailments and as a stimulant for "swimming in the head." The fresh roots were baked and served as "palmetto bread." The small fruits, sometimes called "famine food" were also eaten. The Seminoles, Houma, Choctaw, and other Native American tribes used the leaves of dwarf palmetto much in the same way that they used the leaves of the related tree, cabbage palmetto (*Sabal palmetto*). The fan-shaped leaves were used to thatch homes. Immature blades from the leaves were prepared by sun-bleaching and then braided into thin strips for use as lashings or sewn together to make baskets and other useful articles. Leaves were used to make fans that were carried during certain dances. Coiled-grass baskets tied with palmetto were made by the Houma as late as the 1930s. These unique baskets were made only in Louisiana and Tierra del Fuego. Contemporary people use the

palmetto leaves to weave baskets and make small dolls with hair of Spanish moss.

*Wildlife:* The fruits are an important food for robins and raccoons, providing from 10% to 20% of their diet. Fish crows, mockingbirds, myrtle warblers, pileated and red-bellied woodpeckers, and gray squirrels also eat the fruits.

*Livestock:* This plant is reported to be frequently grazed by cattle, more so than any other palm.

### Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

### Description

*General:* This shrub-like palm generally reaches a height of only 0.5 to 2 m. The stem is usually not visible, being either buried or very short, although it has been reported to occasionally reach 8m tall in Louisiana and Texas. The circular, fan-like leaves are composed of 16 to 40 pale- or blue-green blades that are 15dm wide. These stiff, nearly flat blades do not have a prominent midrib. The white flower petals are 2 to 3 mm long. The small fruits (6-8mm in diameter) are glossy black in color and enclose a large seed (5-6mm). The fruits ripen in the fall.

*Similar species:* Cabbage palmetto (*Sabal palmetto*) is a palm tree that can reach 20 m in height. Saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*) often has a similar appearance as dwarf palmetto as it has a short or horizontal stem. It grows in the same native range but is less cold hardy.

*Distribution:* Native to the Gulf Coast States and Florida. For current distribution, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

### Adaptation

Dwarf palmetto grows along streams, in swampy or rocky hammocks and in maritime heaths along the coastal plain in the southeastern United States. It is common to freshwater wetlands and floodplain forests where it often forms dense thickets. It rarely occurs in upland woodlands. This is the hardiest of the *Sabal* genus as well as one of the hardiest of palms.

### **Establishment**

Dwarf palmetto is simple to grow and can be grown in a wide variety of soils with medium drainage and fertility in both moist and fairly dry areas. It has a slow to moderate growth rate.

*Seeds:* May be easily propagated from seed as fresh seed germinates readily. Transplant in the following year.

*Transplanting:* It is best to transplant in June or July. Water frequently until the plant shows growth to ensure proper establishment of the root system.

### **Management**

Established plants tend to self-sow. Fruit drupes may be removed if self-sowing is not desired.

### **Cultivars, Improved and Selected Materials (and area of origin)**

These plant materials are somewhat available from commercial sources. Contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (formerly Soil Conservation Service) office for more information. Look in the phone book under "United States Government." The Natural Resources Conservation Service will be listed under the subheading "Department of Agriculture."

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