

# *Serenoa repens*: Saw Palmetto<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This publication is intended for anyone interested in identifying and utilizing this Florida native palm in their landscape. *Serenoa repens* is native to the Southeastern United States and found mostly in Florida coastal woodland locations. In Florida, it is native to pinelands and coastal scrub communities. Most often referred to as saw palmetto, this slow-growing, small palm only reaches 3 to 6 feet in height. Its waxy leaves vary in color and can be light to dark green or silver blue-green. The stiff leaves are folded slightly and divided deeply into several dozen segments that split at the tip. Saw palmetto is essentially trunkless and will have 12 to 30 leaves in total. It has white flowers that bear blue-black fruit. This small palm forms as a ground cover in pinelands along the Southern Coastal Plain. The plants are best established from containers and can be difficult to transplant from the field. Known for its medicinal benefits, the fruits of the saw palmetto are sold in health food stores across the United States and harvested by pharmaceutical companies for medicinal purposes.

## General Information

**Scientific name:** *Serenoa repens*

**Pronunciation:** say-ren-O-ah REEP-ens

**Common name:** saw palmetto



Figure 1. Green *Serenoa repens* with inflorescence.

Credits: Karen Williams, UF/IFAS

**Family:** Arecaceae (palm family)

**Subfamily:** Coryphoideae

**Plant type:** shrub

**USDA hardiness zones:** 8a though 11a (Figure 2)

**Cold Hardy:** 11°F to 15°F (−11°C to −9°C)

**Origin:** Southeastern United States

**UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status:** native

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**Attractant:** bees, insects, birds, mammals, bears, and others

**Uses:** small tree (3 to 6 feet), ground cover, shrub

**Availability:** native species

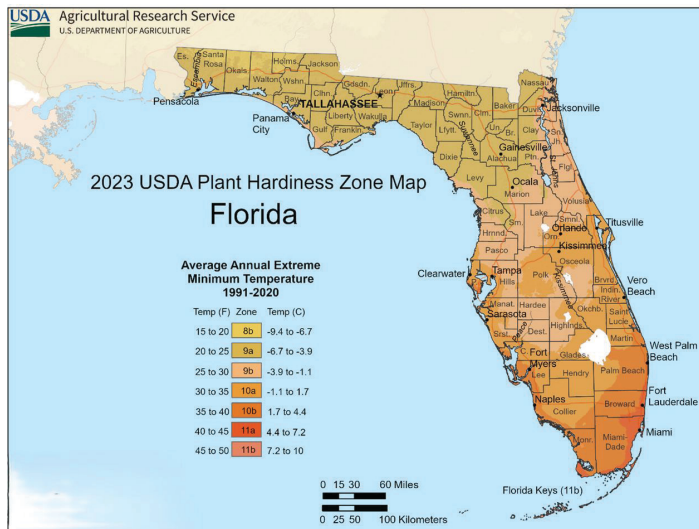


Figure 2. USDA hardiness zones for in Florida. The hardiness zones for *Serenoa repens* are 8a through 11a. For alternative viewing, visit this link to find zones for exact locations by interacting anywhere on the USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map: <https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/>. Credits: Adapted from the U.S. Department of Agriculture

## Description

**Height:** 3 to 6 feet

**Habit:** creeping, rhizomatous

**Plant density:** dense

**Crownshaft:** none

**Growth rate:** slow

**Cultivators:** Blue-green leaved forms occur naturally along the southern east coast of Florida.

**Hazard:** spines on petioles

## Foliage

**Leaf type:** palmate, induplicate, folded slightly, stiff; divided deeply into several dozen segments that split at the tip

**Leaf size:** 3 to 5 feet wide on petioles with backward-pointing spines (Figure 5)

**Leaf color:** light-yellowish green to green, blue-green, or silverish



Figure 3. Green (foreground) and blue-green (background) *Serenoa repens*.

Credits: Karen Williams, UF/IFAS



Figure 4. Green *Serenoa repens* with inflorescence.

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Figure 5. Blue-green *Serenoa repens* with creeping trunk.

Credits: Karen Williams, UF/IFAS



Figure 6. Contrasting green and blue *Serenoa repens*.

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## Flower

**Flower color:** white

**Blooms:** spring

**Inflorescence:** 2 to 3 feet long, intertwined within leaves

## Fruit

**Fruit size:** ½ to 1 inch long

**Fruit color:** deep, shiny blue-black

**Fruit characteristics:** not showy, inconspicuous

**Irritant:** no, unpleasant odor when ripening

## Trunk

**Trunk/bark/branches:** subterranean, creeping

## Culture

**Light requirement:** moderate to high

**Soil tolerance:** widely adaptable

**Drought tolerance:** high

**Salt tolerance:** moderate to high

**Soil pH:** acidic to very alkaline

**Hurricane tolerance:** high

## Other

**Nutritional requirements:** low

**Human hazards:** spiny

**Medicinal uses:** Fruits are used to prevent and treat an enlarged prostate.

## Uses and Management

This palm is typically used as a shrub and groundcover. It can also be used as a specimen plant or grouped together to form a buffer shrub border.

Propagation is by seed.

Caterpillars and fungi affect the inflorescence and fruits but not the ornamental value.

## Pests and Diseases

### Pests

- Palmetto weevil (*Rhynchophorus cruentatus*)
- Palm bud moth or coconut moth (*Atheloca subrufella*)
- Palmetto borer moth or cabbage palm caterpillar (*Litoprosopus futilis*)

### Diseases

Anthracnose (*Colletotrichum gloeosporioides*) is a fungus that causes premature fruit drop.

## References

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