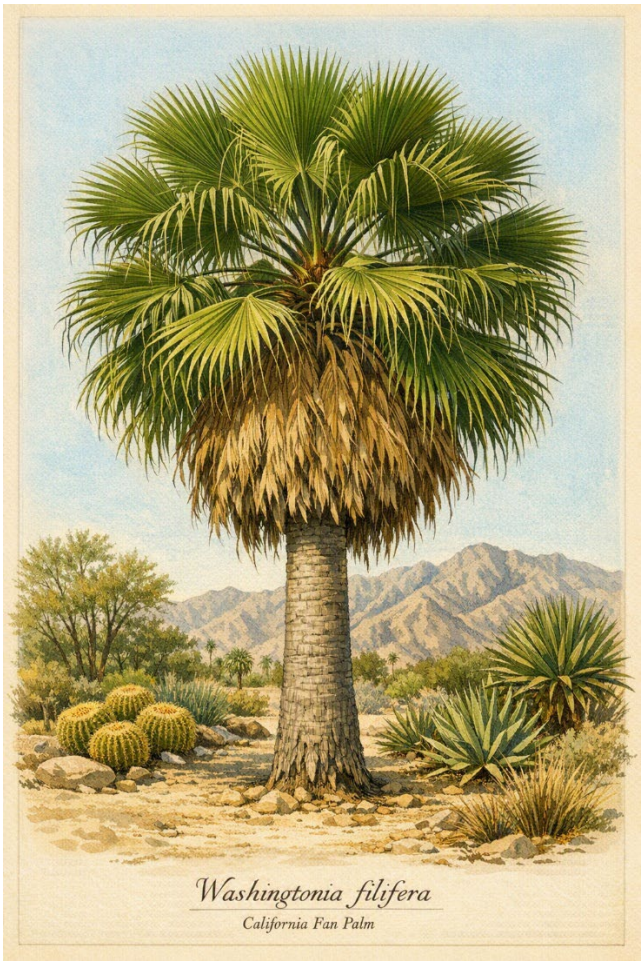
Palm Growing in Palm Springs

By John Bendt, July, 2026



In the late 1870's when the railroads finally came to Los Angeles and Southern California, savvy advertisers in the East dictated that all pictures, signs, brochures or billboards created to encourage train travel to Southern California must depict palm trees in them. They knew, and rightly so, that the allure of palm trees stems not just from their beauty, but also from the fact that palm trees symbolize beautiful sunny warm weather, vacation fun, and most of all – no snow.

I've loved palms all my life and was in the Northern California chapter of the Palm Society starting in 1982. We called the San Francisco Bay Area the "Frozen Tundra" and Southern California was palm growing heaven.

Growing palms is a big reason that I was encouraged to move to Southern California in 1991, though not by train – I took a plane.

When I lived in Los Angeles, (the Highland Park hills avocado belt, Sunset zone 23, USDA zone 9B), I was able to successfully grow many tropical palms, and of course, New Caledonia and Madagascar palms were my favorites. The palms were planted from 5 – 15 gallon containers and were small and slow growing. I dreamed of one day in the distant future having a Palm Society meeting in my garden.

At one Palm Society meeting I attended in La Habra, I remember that I was astonished to see a garden with a veritable forest of flowering and fruiting palms! There were giant Pritchardias, tall Chrysalidocarpus, and many other exotic palms that I could walk under. I definitely had "Palm Envy".

I soon retired and moved from Los Angeles to Palm Springs, leaving my mostly short palm trees behind with fond memories and no regrets. The subtropical low desert would be a new palm challenge - so many new species to try, so much to learn. It was very exciting! I brought in a truckload of new palms and relandscaped my quarter-acre lot, desert in the front, tropical around the pool. Here I implemented my "Five Palm Rule": any window I look out, I must see at least five palms. More is better.

Some palms died from the extreme heat, but most have flourished and heat-loving palms have sky-rocketed in growth. In Palm Springs we have a few July and August days, not many though, of 120 to 124 degrees.

Summer temperatures hover around 108 degrees most days. I've found that many palms can take the heat with heavy watering, but can't take full scorching sun. Afternoon shade or shade cloth is the answer for them.

In the 11 years I've lived here, we've experienced only three light frosts down to 30 and 32 degrees for a couple hours. Lately our lowest temperature was 36 degrees. I suspect that global warming along with the City Heat Island effect can be thanked for that. We're supposed to be in USDA Zone 9B, (winter low 25 to 30 degrees), instead we've been in USDA Zone 10B (winter low 35 to 40 degrees) for the last several years.

Now, for most palm species, growth stops completely or they grow agonizingly slowly at temperatures below 60°F. From April through November our low temperatures are reliably above 60 degrees and through

the summer months, our lows are in the upper 70's to the low 80's. Palms grow all day long.

So today after a short time in Palm Springs I have many palms that I can walk under. My garden has filled in and at last I feel satisfied. Some of my successes are:

Acoelorrhaphe wrightii – super fast, flowering.

Arenga engleri – needs shade here.

Attalea cohune – needs shade, beautiful 16-foot leaves

Bismarckia – grows eight gigantic leaves a year.

Brahea armata, B. brandegeei, B. elegans, B. moorei (needs shade)

Butia – some leaves burn in summer- doesn't fruit

Chamaedorea plumosa, C. hooperiana, C. seifrizii - all need shade.

Chamaerops humilis, varieties cerifera and vulcano

Chrysalidocarpus lutescens - (needs shade)

Coccothrinax argentea, C. azul, C. miraguama, C. montana - all flowering, no seeds.

Hyphaene coriacea – four stems, fruiting.

Livistona mariae

Nannorrhops arabica

Phoenix acaulis, P. roebelinii

Pritchardia remota – needs shade.

Ravenea glauca, R. xerofila – both afternoon shade.

Rhapis hybrid – shade.

Rhapidophyllum hystrix - shade

Roystonea regia – needs lots of water, fast

Sabal minor, variety Blountstown dwarf, variety Louisiana trunking, Sabal miamiensis (extinct in the wild)

Syagrus romanzoffianiana, S. yungasensis (small clumping).

Trithrinax campestris

Washingtonias – of course.

Wodyetia - needs shade in summer, sun other seasons.

I also grow cactus, aloes, agaves, bougainvillea (bloom spectacularly), gardenia, hibiscus, plumeria, heliconia, jatropha, cycads, etc. plus citrus and peach trees. No place on Earth can everything we want be grown I realize, and I'm very happy with the things I can grow in the desert. Because of our sandy soil with excellent drainage and lack of frost, I've learned that the subtropical low desert is a wonderful place for palm growers to plant our gardens.