



Above - The trunk of a large *Sabal bermudana* growing in Loran Whitlock's Los Angeles garden.

Below - Two dwarf Sabals, *S. etonia* and *S. minor* growing in Riverside.

Next page - An extremely blue *Sabal uresana* growing in Nong Nooch Tropical Botanical Garden in Thailand.

# Sabals in Southern California

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To be honest with you, Sabals didn't excite me that much, with a few exceptions, until the big freeze last January. Creeping out my front door to inspect the inevitable devastation that freezing, sunny January morning, I barely glanced at the *Sabal bermudana* and/or *S. domingensis* planted there. They ALWAYS looked good, and that morning was no exception. But a few weeks later, when almost everything else was dead, dying or in various stages of defoliating, the Sabals started looking better and better to me. I remember an older Palm Society member selling his Sabal palm at an auction one year and telling us all that if we wanted a palm that was going to still be around at his age no matter what freezes or droughts came along, this was the one to buy, and I will never forget that. I didn't buy his palm, but I sure hope someone did, and is appreciating it now.

I don't think I'm alone when I struggle to fall in love with this genus. They look too darn much like Washingtonias (of which there are far too many, until they get super tall - then they're great), except that Sabals grow ten or twenty times more slowly. So why would I want a palm that takes up so much room and that most non-palm-growers are just going to assume is another Washingtonia, only one where something must be amiss, because it's taking forever to form a trunk? My neighbors think I am really a pretty lousy palm grower, because even the common Mexican fan palms I have in the yard hardly grow!

Well, Sabals don't really look like Washingtonias, at least not to me anymore. Their leaves are massive, leathery and costapalmate, sort of a mix between a fan and a feather leaf. And they have no thorns on the petioles. That does NOT mean their petioles are safe to handle carelessly because some are razor-sharp! And they tend to be a bit beefier than Washingtonias (except for the shorties, and *Sabal rosei*, *S. yapa* and *S. mauritiiiformis*). Still the nuances are lost on my neighbors.

Years ago I got a bunch of seed from





Florida from various Sabals and was almost disappointed to see that they all germinated. Thanks to moving and to various 'logistical' problems over the years, my personal Sabal seedling collection dwindled; yet I still have too many seedlings in smaller pots that need homes, and my new dinky yard just isn't that home. Sabals are easy germinators, for the most part, and they are pretty hard to kill as seedlings. Though I discovered that if you never water them, they will eventually die.

Now that I have some Sabals that are about four feet tall, and looking pretty healthy, I am glad I have a few planted in the yard. They are so green and healthy-looking after the freeze, compared to everything else, they became a permanent foundation of 'tropicalness' that everything else just adorns. Ferns, perennials, and even the trees and succulents in my front yard are all making their slow, steady comebacks, and are beginning to make the front look a bit exotic and tropical again, after a winter and spring of looking more like a compost collection, except for these few deep green and tropical-looking Sabals. And they DO look different from Washingtonias, no matter what the neighbors think.

For most comments on individual species, you will probably have to read others experiences. Sadly, I lost the tags to these palms and they all look too much alike for me to tell them apart. I have at least one *S. bermudana* and *S.*

*domingensis*, and they slowly turn into massive palms, with ornamental trunks and huge costapalmate, leathery green leaves. Which are which, I have no idea.

There are a couple of ten-year-old *Sabal etonia* in the yard, too, and they still look like little seedlings. I'm looking forward to their first real palmate leaves in, perhaps, another ten years?

I have three palms left of the *Sabal mauritiformis*/*S. yapa* 'variety', but again, I lost the tags and can't recall which are which. Only one of the three is healthy because it was planted in the back under some protection in a raised planter box. All the rest were dug up and tossed long ago, or else they are struggling to make new leaves again after total defoliation last winter. Neither species is cold tolerant and I lost nearly my entire collection, at least one of each species. I just don't know which are left. These seedlings were already in trouble even before the freeze, just from the few days of frost we had earlier. Wimpy species! These were all ten-year-old seedlings, and one was growing particularly well, throwing leaves about four feet long and looking super tropical. Now it is pushing deformed, sad little fans without petioles, but it is thankfully alive, and may be looking good in another year. I had a *S. mauritiformis* in the Thousand Oaks yard that was a beauty. It burned every single winter, but grew fast and was trunking from a 15 gallon in just five years. Wonder how it's doing now.







Left - A row of very large *Sabal palmettos* growing in Gainesville, Florida.

Below - Ripe fruit on a *Sabal minor* growing at the Huntington.

Bottom - A closeup of the base of a *Sabal causiarum* showing the spineless petioles and a surprising amount of color.



In the past, I also grew *Sabal Riverside*, *S. "blackburniana"* (an invalid name impossible to apply to a recognized species), *S. etonia*, *S. causarium*, *S. palmetto*, *S. uresana* and *S. minor*. All were agonizingly slow until they reached a 20-gallon size), when they became just painfully slow. My *S. causarium* was always suffering from what looked like a potassium deficiency, and I have seen this on many others' palms as well. In fact, for years, one way I identified, with alarming success, *S. causarium* in California was by its yellow petioles and yellow, blotchy older leaves. Imagine my surprise when on a visit to Florida, and later to Hawaii, I saw *S. causariums* without any yellow on their petioles or leaves. Hmm. There went my foolproof identification characteristic. Of the palms above, *S. uresana* was easily my favorite, as the individual I had was particularly blue. But what a slug! After ten years, it was barely twice its size at purchase. The others, at least as seedlings, were hard to tell apart, though *S. "blackburnia"* seemed beefier than the others. *Sabal Riverside* is supposed to be a fast palm, but I grew it in full shade (the only place left in that yard) and that was definitely not conducive to fast growth.

Iks in Florida are frequently surprised by the lack of Sabals growing here. What they don't realize is things grow five or ten times faster in Florida than they do here. *Sabal palmetto* is considered a fairly fast and decent landscaping palm out there. Here in Southern California, it can be grown for decades without much chance of it ever reaching your roof line. So as a landscape genus, it is my opinion that Sabals are probably never going to catch on here. But, as that wise Palm Society member said, they'll still be here when all else fails. I believe it.

