

The Lost Sabals

Article and photos by Justen Dobbs, *Riverside, CA*

In California, palmetto palms are not seen very often, whereas in Florida and the Carolinas, they are everywhere. The Mexican fan palm (*Washingtonia robusta*), which is native to Mexico, is our version of the palmetto palm (*Sabal palmetto*). However, the Mexican Fan is much faster growing and a little neater looking, which destined it for landscape use in Southern California. Only a palm collector could tell them apart; to the general public, they're both fan palms. The palmetto is more cold-hardy than the Mexican fan, but in Southern California this isn't a necessary feature.

I have grown *Sabal minor*, *S. mexicana*, *S. uresana*, *S. uresana x mexicana*, *S. causiarum*, *S. rosei*, and *S. bermudana*. I knew long before I began growing them that they were notoriously slow. In general, my seedlings take about 6 months to germinate and 3-4 years to get to a 1 gallon size. Compare that to a Mexican fan, which can reach a one-gallon size in a year, it becomes obvious why palmettos haven't become popular in California.

Not all *Sabals* are slow growers though; *Sabal "blackburniana"* (an invalid name and one impossible to apply to recognized species) has a reputation for being a



Left - *Sabal "blackburniana"* growing in Southern California. Although this is an invalid name that cannot be linked to a recognized species, *Sabals* labeled with this name have a reputation for being relatively fast growing.

Above - A closeup of seeds on a mature *Sabal "blackburniana"*.

Next page - *Sabal uresana*, an ornamental *Sabal* with bright blue-silver leaves, growing in habitat in Sonora, Mexico.



moderate grower. Also, some *Sabals* are very frost tolerant, such as *S. mexicana*, which can reportedly take frost below zero degrees Fahrenheit. In my opinion, the most beautiful *Sabals* are *S. uresana* and *S. mauritiformis*. *Sabal uresana*, or the Sonoran palmetto, has bright blue-silver leaves, making it stand out from the group. *Sabal mauritiformis* has deeply split leaves that can reach six feet across and are lime green on top, with silver undersides, giving it a dramatic effect, especially at night, when glimmers of light reflect off the leaf's undersides. However, as this palm matures and develops a tall trunk, the leaf crown tends to look wind-beaten and untidy. I think *S. mauritiformis* is best enjoyed while a seedling (You can dig it out and sell it once it matures!).

Your next question might be, "Why aren't these two *Sabals* grown here?" Again, it has to do with growth speed. There are nurseries on the East coast that grow *Sabal palmetto* due to their tropical look and cold hardiness. For *S. uresana* and *S. mauritiformis*, it doesn't make sense financially for palm nurserymen to grow slow fan palms if they don't have to. For them, silver and green leaves or uniquely large

leaves aren't enough reasons to invest in these species. Also, seeds of these species are typically expensive and not always available. These reasons doom them to remain lost in obscurity.

Some *Sabals* are endangered or extinct in habitat, such as *Sabal miamiensis*, which used to dot the landscape of Southeast Florida, but has likely been eradicated completely by the concrete jungle. *Sabal miamiensis* looks much like *S. etonia* or *S. minor*, as it grows along the ground in a creeping habit and never gets too tall. Its unique leaves have a very strong curve (costapalmate) and a slight bluish hue. This intriguing little palm has unfortunately been lost to urbanization.

Thus, the popularity of most *Sabal* species is doomed to reside solely with collectors. All of them are surprisingly easy to germinate and very drought tolerant. They can also take full sun at just about any age and are not greedy when it comes to nutrients. So, go plant a few of the more rare *Sabal* seeds and be patient. Otherwise, they may soon become one of the Lost *Sabals*. 