**Growing sago palms**

The palm-like sago is fairly common in North Florida landscapes. They are commonly called sago palms but they are not true palms. Botanically, they are members of the Cycadaceae family and are more correctly called cycads. But because they are so similar to palms in both looks and growing requirements most people call them palms.

They are usually used as specimen plants to give a tropical touch to the landscape. The sago has attractive deep green feather-like leaves with a graceful drooping growth habit.

There are two species of sago grown in Florida - queen sago, Cycas circinalis, and king sago, Cycas revoluta. Queen sago is not sufficiently cold hardy enough to be grown in north Florida. It is only grown in south Florida. King sago will tolerate colder weather and is grown throughout the state. But the occasional hard freeze may injure king sagos growing in north Florida.

Many people do not allow enough space for sagos to develop. You’ll see them frequently planted too close to a building, sidewalk, driveway, etc. Even though they grow slowly, they can easily reach six to eight feet in width and four to six feet in height.

Sago plants are either male or female. Female plants will eventually produce a round felt mass, which is the flower. Male plants eventually form an elongated cone-like structure. The plant has to be mature (fifteen, twenty years old or older) before it produces its reproductive structure. When this happens, people are usually surprised by this “unusual” growth that originates from the center of the plant. If a pollen producing male is close by, the female flower may be pollinated and viable seeds formed. The golden colored structure (flower) will partly open in fall revealing the bright orange walnut sized seed.

New sagos can be produced from these seed. Wait to collect the seed after the flower falls apart. Otherwise the embryo is not fully developed. Sago seed germination is a little complex but if you are interested, contact your local UF/IFAS Extension Office for details.

Sagos also can be propagated from offshoots called pups, which grow from the lower trunk or base of the parent plant. Remove the pup with a sharp instrument. Try to avoid damaging the parent plant. Plant in a well drained soil and place in an area with partial shade until a root system develops. Then you can gradually increase the light level.

Sagos growing in a landscape need to be fertilized three to four times a year, March through September, with a "palm special" fertilizer. Refer to label instructions for fertilizer rates.

Frizzle top, caused by the deficiency of manganese, is common in sago palms. As the condition develops new leaves near the top of the plant first turn yellow and then tan
and take on a zigzag or accordion appearance and look frizzled. To correct and/or prevent frizzle top, apply one to five pounds (depending on plant size) of manganese sulfate to the soil annually. Frizzle top will be more common where soil pH is too alkaline or where roots are staying too wet.

Scale insects are common on sagos. Inspect the underside of leaves on a regular basis especially if you notice yellowing or black sooty mold on the foliage. To control, treat with insecticidal oil and always treat the underside of the leaves.

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