

## Small Palms for Pot or Soil

Written by Jeff Shimonski, BT Contributor  
November 2019

---

### They're slow-growing, easy care, and love our soil



This month I feature a group of interesting palms you can easily grow in your landscape, either in the ground or in containers. Since most of our home landscapes here, especially the newer sites where the soil was stripped off before construction, have alkaline soil, we should consider plants that grow well in that condition so we won't need excessive amounts of fertilizer.

Decades ago at the Parrot Jungle, we were growing many species of a smaller-statured palm known generically as *Chamaedorea*. I had seen many of these during my first trips to Central America in the 1970s and '80s, before much of the forest was cut and these species became harder, or impossible, to find in the wild.

One of our introductions into the park was *Chamaedorea metallica*, a species native to wet forest in Mexico, where these palms grow on limestone. It was so distinct, with its dark, thick gray-green foliage. It was the perfect smaller landscape plant and a slow grower. I have a plant in my garden that tops off at six feet. It is about 40 years old.

The palm to the left in the photo that accompanies this article is a *Chamaedorea metallica* with split leaves that are characteristic of this clone. Normally, the foliage is entire with no splits. I find the entire leaved clone more attractive, but some connoisseurs go crazy when they see my split-leaved clone.

The two palms in the photo are growing in the same pot. The second palm is *Chamaedorea brachypoda*, a

## Small Palms for Pot or Soil

Written by Jeff Shimonski, BT Contributor  
November 2019

---

small stoloniferous palm that spreads very slowly via thin underground stems. This species is four to five feet tall. In the container they are approaching three feet in height.

There are a number of stoloniferous *Chamaedorea* species. I have a couple of them in my landscape. They're not invasive and are easy to control, and add another interesting perspective to the surroundings.

At Parrot Jungle we grew many of the smaller plants in containers. This allowed us to change sections of the garden regularly to feature different species of plants. I find potted plants to be a nice feature in my own landscape. I can move them around the garden and reposition them. Since most plants will grow toward the sun, I can turn the pots so I don't develop leaning plants.

These two palms have been in this container for about five years and can probably last another five years before they need a larger container or I decide to plant them directly into the ground.

I'm quite proud of the soil in the pot. It's entirely from compost I make at home, and not store-bought. I sometimes tell people that these are Amazon palms -- but not because they're from the Amazon in South America (they are from Mexico and Central America). I compost lots of the delivery boxes from mail-order companies to help create my potting soil medium.

I take off the labels, tape, and any staples, and then tear up the boxes. It's good exercise. I then soak the boxes to get the cardboard softer before I tear them up into still smaller pieces before adding them to my compost. Along with all the vegetable matter from my kitchen and the addition of coarse sand, the finished compost is great, and I didn't spend a fortune buying and lugging around bags of potting soil.

I think the *Chamaedorea* palms are an underutilized group of palms in our local landscapes and gardens, and on our balconies. They're mostly slow growing so they don't rapidly fill up the container or outgrow their setting.

They're relatively insect- and disease-free, and are more tolerant of cold. Remember way back, when it was colder here and we had regular freezes? We rarely saw frost damage on these

## Small Palms for Pot or Soil

Written by Jeff Shimonski, BT Contributor  
November 2019

---

palms, taking into account, of course, they are understory palms and we didn't grow them out in the open.

Another benefit of some *Chamaedorea* species is the fragrance produced when they bloom. Since the inflorescence, the structure that holds the flowers, can be large, maybe a foot long, depending on the species, and with dozens or hundreds of minute flowers that bloom over a period of a week or two, the fragrance at night is delicious.

We had a larger *Chamaedorea* with multiple trunks that grew to 15 feet tall at the park and was originally named after the chief horticulturist Nat DeLeon (my boss at the time), who introduced them into cultivation. When I'd go into the park at night to turn on the irrigation system during those warm summer nights, I was often met with a distinctive and very pleasant scent from this palm.

Jeff Shimonski is an ISA-certified arborist municipal specialist, retired director of horticulture at Parrot Jungle and Jungle Island, and principal of Tropical Designs of Florida. Contact him at [jef@tropicaldesigns.com](mailto:jef@tropicaldesigns.com)

Feedback: [letters@biscaynetimes.com](mailto:letters@biscaynetimes.com)