Indoor Palms

Palms give a wonderful tropical feeling to the indoor garden. They are bold houseplants that command attention.

The Cat Palm (*Chamaedorea cataractarum*) is one of the hardiest parlor palms to grow indoors.

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**Height/Spread**

Palms suited to indoor cultivation are slow-growing while young or have a small mature size. Some palms will, in time, outgrow their space. An overgrown plant should be discarded, or if a hardy type, moved outdoors. Because new growth occurs from a high central growing point, palms cannot be pruned back to reduce their height.

**Ornamental Features**

Palms are grown for their exotic and boldly textured foliage. Palm leaves, also known as fronds, are either fan (palmate) or feather (pinnate) shaped. The triangular leaflets of fishtail palms (*Caryota* species) resemble the tail fin of a fish.

**Problems**

In the home, plant diseases are very rarely a problem. Too much or too little water plus insects and mites are the main problems. Root rot usually results from a soil mix that does not drain quickly or overly frequent watering.

Several scale insects attack palms. Mealybugs are another common pest. Mites are often a problem in the home because of low humidity and warm temperatures. By moving palms outside for the summer, predators and rainfall will help control many houseplant insect pests. For more information see [HGIC 2252 Common Houseplant Insects & Related Pests](http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/).

Cold injury will cause reddish-brown dead areas on leaves after a few days. Most houseplant palms need temperatures above 45 °F to prevent chilling damage.

Palms grow best with warmth. Protect them from drafts near doors, windows, and air conditioning. Most palms prefer temperatures of 60 °F at night and between 70 and 80 °F during the day. Many palms will benefit from cooler temperatures of 55 to 60 °F during the winter, when not actively growing.

Tips of lower leaves may turn brown and die from excessive fertilization. Excessive iron fertilization can cause foliage spotting.

Browning of leaves can also be caused by dry air and/or lack of water. Indoors, if the humidity level is below 50%, the pot saucer can be filled with gravel to increase the moisture level without rotting the plant roots. A room humidifier may also be used or weekly misting with a spray bottle will be beneficial.
Culture
Most palms need bright natural light year-round. Filtered light near a south-east-or west-facing window is suitable for most indoor palms. Palms need to be kept moist. They should never be allowed to dry out or allowed to stand in water. Excessively wet soil can lead to root rot. Water thoroughly when the surface of the soil dries, and discard the water in the saucer after the pot drains. Soil mixes for palms must be porous with plenty of organic matter to ensure both adequate moisture and excellent drainage. For more information see HGIC 1459 Indoor Plants – Watering.

Palms, like many houseplants, benefit immensely from spending the summer outside. When they are moved outside for the summer, gradually accustom them to higher light levels. Indoor palms should not be placed in direct sun while outside nor sit in the saucer that will collect excess water and rot the roots. For more information see HGIC 1454 Indoor Plants – Moving Plants Indoors & Outdoors.

Fertilize with a slow-release palm fertilizer with an analysis like 12-4-12 or 8-2-12. It should contain micronutrients, such as iron, manganese, zinc, boron and copper to maintain a healthy plant. Fertilize only two to three times a year while the plant is actively growing during the spring and summer months. Excessive fertilizer can be harmful to palms.

Palms do best when their roots are confined and may only need repotting every two to three years, if roots fill the pot. Repot when needed in spring or early summer. Many palms have fragile root systems and can be easily damaged, so care should be taken when re-potting the plant. Most palms are propagated from seed. Some can be divided to create new plants.

Do not use any of the leaf shining products on palms as they can severely injure the foliage. For more information see HGIC 1450 Indoor Plants – Cleaning, Fertilizing, Containers & Light Requirements.

Types of Indoor Palms
Burmese Fishtail Palm (Caryota mitis): The large pinnate leaves have individual leaflets that are triangular with a wavy edge. They look very much like fishtails and give this palm a unique texture. This interesting palm grows 6 to 10 feet tall indoors and arches 3 to 6 feet wide. This palm grows 6 to 8 inches a year.

Fishtail palms do best in bright indirect sunlight. Plants need a minimum temperature of 60 °F. Night temperatures of 65 to 70 °F and day temperatures of 75 to 85 °F are ideal. Keep their soil moist at all times. Fishtail palms are prone to spider mites, so watch carefully for them.

Parlor Palms (Chamaedorea species): These graceful palms are frequently grown as houseplants. Parlor palms have thin stems and large, elegant feathered leaves. Their spread is quite wide, making them suitable for large spaces. These are the classic palms that graced Victorian parlors. They need a minimum winter temperature of 60 °F. Parlor palms tolerate lower light levels well. They prefer high to moderate humidity, but are adaptable.

- **Cat Palm (Chamaedorea cataractarum):** This palm grows in stemless clumps, and will thrive in bright light. The soil needs to be kept evenly moist, but not soggy. It is one of the easiest parlor palms to grow indoors.
- **Parlor Palm or Neanthe Palm** (Chamaedorea elegans): This is a small indoor palm, often with several single stems per pot that do not form clumps.

- **Bamboo Palm (Chamaedorea erumpens):** Tall plants form clumps of stems that are smooth, slender and green. The long, arching leaves are held in upright clusters on
the stems. Individual leaflets are short, broad and curving. This palm has a narrow growth habit that is appropriate for most homes.

- **Grass-leafed Parlor Palm (Chamaedorea seifrizii)**: Their clustered, slender, cane-like stems with long narrow leaflets will grow to 8 to 10 feet tall.

**European Fan Palm (Chamaerops humilis)**: European fan palms are dependable palms for indoor use. Fan-shaped fronds are carried on 4-foot high stems. Each leaf is about 2 feet across, gray-green and deeply cut.

Fan palms need three to four hours of direct sunlight daily. Normal room temperatures with a winter rest period at 55 to 60 °F are preferred.

**Areca Palm (Chrysalidocarpus lutescens)**: This very popular palm grows 6 to 7 feet tall indoors. The fronds are long, feather-shaped, and arching with narrow leaflets. The light green fronds are borne on slender, clumping, yellow-orange stalks. Areca grow 6 to 10 inches a year and often outgrow their allotted space. Give them plenty of room. Areca palms are very susceptible to spider mites infestations.

Areca palms do best in bright indirect sunlight. Place them near an east-, west- or south-facing window. Temperatures at night of 65 to 70 °F and 75 to 85 °F during the day are ideal.

**Kentia or Thatch Leaf Palms (Howea forsteriana)**: The kentia palm has a slender trunk and a graceful crown of dark-green, drooping, feather-shaped fronds. They will grow slowly in a tub for many years. This is one of the most tolerant and adaptable indoor palms.

Kentias will tolerate relatively low light and humidity, but they grow best with bright light and regular care. Water kentia palms abundantly during the summer, but only water when their potting mix is dry during the winter.

**Pygmy Date Palm (Phoenix roebelinii)**: The pygmy date palm is a miniature of the palm grown throughout the Middle East for its fruit. It can eventually become a 12-foot tree, but takes many years before it begins to form a trunk. The arching, feather-shaped fronds are quite fine in texture. They grow up to 3 feet long in a thick crown.

Pygmy date palms are adaptable and easy indoor plants. This palm grows best in bright indirect sunlight, ideally from an east window with morning sun. Keep the soil moist at all times, but do not let the pots stand in water.

**Lady Palms (Rhapis species)**: These multi-stemmed fan palms are quite adaptable and easy to grow, if given excellent care and good-quality water. Lady palms have large, thick, shiny leaves with blunt tips. Their sturdy clumping stems are covered with dark brown fiber that appears woven. This is the only palm species that has cultivars in green and variegated forms. The variegated *Rhapis* are slower-growing than the green forms and need less fertilizer and lower light levels.

Most lady palms grow best in bright, indirect light near a window or skylight. The large lady palm is the most adaptable to low light areas, and the Thailand lady palm must be kept constantly moist. The other lady palms should be allowed to become somewhat dry between thorough waterings. Heavily and repeatedly drench lady palms with water twice a year to leach excess fertilizer salts from their potting mix.

A rich houseplant potting mix, such as an African violet mix, is ideal. Lady palms are slow-growing and need very little fertilizer. Scale insects are a major pest of lady palms. They may hide in the fibrous leaf bases, so inspect carefully for them.

If necessary, lady palms should be divided in spring or early summer when they are actively growing, and they can also be air-layered.

- **Large Lady Palm & Miniature Lady Palms (Rhapis excelsa)**: These are the most widely grown species of the lady palms. They easily adapt to most indoor situations and so are popular for its ease of care, durability, insect resistance and long life. *Rhapis excelsa* is divided into two groups: the large lady palms and the highly refined miniature lady palms that are developed and prized by collectors. Large lady palm has large, thick leaves on sturdy canes. They can grow to be more than 8 feet tall and as wide as they are tall.
Cultivars of both the green and variegated miniature lady palms have unique leaf shapes and growth habits. Japanese hobbyists often artificially dwarf these plants by growing them as bonsai. Many are true dwarfs that will grow only 4 feet tall in several decades.

'Zuikonishiki' is popular, easy to grow and a prolific producer of offshoots.

'Chiyodazuru' has narrow stripes on green leaves. Intense sunlight and heat can fade leaves, and strong fertilizer can mask the stripes. For best color, this variety needs cool temperatures, medium light and medium fertilizer rates.

- **Thailand Lady Palm (Rhapis subtilis):** Thailand lady palm is a small species, seldom more than 6 feet in height. The stems are narrow with a smooth, brown fiber covering. It is almost impossible to divide, and requires high humidity and abundant moisture. This species especially can be severely affected by spider mites. It prefers temperatures of 60 to 80 °F. It can be difficult as a houseplant because of its need for humidity.


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