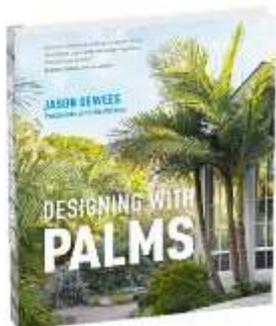# 'Designing with Palms'
by Jason Dewees –
Palm Planting Tips

The Garden Club invited Jason Dewees to speak at the Garden Club a while ago, and as a result, we have acquired a copy of his wonderful book *Designing with Palms* for our library. It is a lovely book with a treasure trove of information and gorgeous photos. We are sharing some of his palm planting tips in this month's *Let's Learn* article.

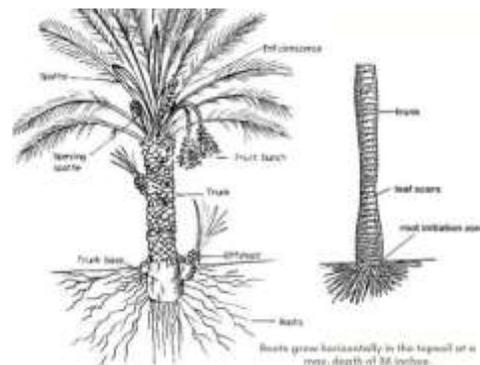Planting palms small has many benefits – wider choice of species, stronger and faster growth in-ground, and cost savings to name a few. Landscapers, however, love large palms because they provide instant trees and are easier to transplant at large sizes than full-sized trees.

Palms need surprisingly little room for their roots, allowing for planting even in tight spaces. Be aware of future height and breadth, though – they may lean out towards the sun or away from each other to get what they need. If you want the visual impact that close planting of palms provides, stagger the height of every other palm, which will provide more room for the crowns.

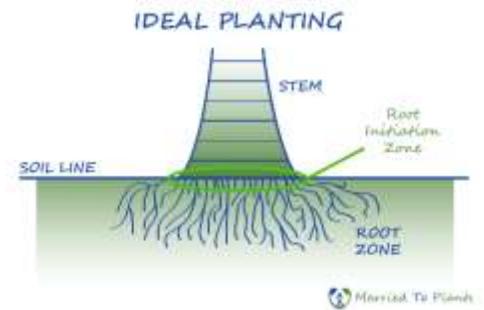Palm roots are not invasive; but if needed, most established palms can handle having a *small* portion of their root mat cut away from underground water or sewer pipes. Remember, the roots of large palms do not get any thicker as the tree grows. The roots do branch, but the primary root will not expand. This is one of the reasons palm trees will not crack a sidewalk like other trees and can be planted closer to a house foundation or fence wall.

Planting Tips

- The first step is to dig your hole 2x the volume of the existing root ball. However, you do not want to dig too much *under* the planting area because the tree will sink over time into the softer soil and then run the risk of being seated too deeply.

- Do not cut roots or manipulate root balls of container-grown palms too much. Doing so can set the growth back or even kill them. Instead, place the root ball intact into the planting hole – don't drop it in, as that can cause further shock to a plant that will already be subject to transplant shock. Moisten the root ball well before planting to give it a good start.

- Backfill with a well-draining medium. If a large palm, thoroughly water the planting hole when the palm is halfway planted, then again after planting is complete. This helps remove air pockets and helps to settle the palm.

- Place the plant so that the base of its stem, where new roots emerge (the 'root initiation zone') remains below soil grade. Be sure to match the planting grade to the top of the root initiation zone, but no deeper. Create a shallow berm just outside of the root ball perimeter to retain water in the root ball area.

- Make sure the plant is snug in its hole with no air or cavity between the base of the stem and the ground. Fill in air pockets and compact the backfill around the root ball to stabilize the plant. Some species have aerial roots breaking out of the stem surface – it is best not to bury those.

- The best planting time is the beginning of the rainy season.

- He suggests a *balanced* fertilizer at planting time and then using a palm formula quarterly for the first one to three years. Palms need more water to become established but should not need too much water afterward.

- Palms tend to be heavy feeders, but local conditions will determine fertilization needs. Heavy rainfall can pose nutritional problems. Use organic fertilization and mulching practices – palms like the mycorrhizal relationships in their habitats.

- If planting into a container, don't choose one too large for the palm's size. Palms will first concentrate on growing roots so don't be concerned if you don't see too much growth the first year. If the pot is right-sized, the palm will send up new fronds sooner than if too large a pot, where it will concentrate on root growth first.

Sources:
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Article: Christa Varacalli