Washingtonia filifera: Desert Palm
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Introduction
Commonly seen at 40 to 50 feet but capable of soaring to 80 feet in height, Desert Fan Palm is quickly recognized as related to the much-overused, straight, single-trunked street palm of years past, Washingtonia robusta. However, Desert Fan Palm is better suited to the home landscape since it grows more slowly and is shorter. This also allows it to be used in more garden applications, such as containers or grouped together as a mass planting. It does not grow well when it is over-irrigated in Florida because it frequently develops trunk or root rot.

General Information
Scientific name: Washingtonia filifera
Pronunciation: wosh-ing-TOE-nee-uh fill-LIFF-er-uh
Common name(s): Desert Palm, California Washingtonia Palm
Family: Arecaceae
USDA hardiness zones: 9A through 11 (Fig. 2)
Origin: not native to North America
Invasive potential: little invasive potential
Uses: street without sidewalk; tree lawn 3-4 feet wide; tree lawn 4-6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft wide
Availability: not native to North America

Figure 1. Middle-aged Washingtonia filifera: Desert Palm
Credits: Ed Gilman

Figure 2. Range
**Description**

- **Height:** 40 to 60 feet
- **Spread:** 10 to 15 feet
- **Crown uniformity:** symmetrical
- **Crown shape:** palm, upright/erect
- **Crown density:** open
- **Growth rate:** moderate
- **Texture:** coarse

**Foliage**

- **Leaf arrangement:** alternate (Fig. 3)
- **Leaf type:** costapalmate
- **Leaf margin:** entire
- **Leaf shape:** star-shaped
- **Leaf venation:** palmate
- **Leaf type and persistence:** evergreen, broadleaf evergreen
- **Leaf blade length:** more than 36 inches
- **Leaf color:** green
- **Fall color:** no color change
- **Fall characteristic:** not showy

**Flower**

- **Flower color:** yellow, white/cream/gray
- **Flower characteristics:** not showy

**Fruit**

- **Fruit shape:** oval, round
- **Fruit length:** less than .5 inch
- **Fruit covering:** fleshy
- **Fruit color:** black
- **Fruit characteristics:** does not attract wildlife; not showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem

**Trunk and Branches**

- **Trunk/bark/branches:** branches don’t droop; not showy; typically one trunk; thorns
- **Pruning requirement:** needed for strong structure
- **Breakage:** resistant
- **Current year twig color:** not applicable
- **Current year twig thickness:**
- **Wood specific gravity:** unknown

**Culture**

- **Light requirement:** full sun
- **Soil tolerances:** clay; sand; loam; acidic; alkaline; well-drained
- **Drought tolerance:** high
- **Aerosol salt tolerance:** moderate

**Other**

- **Roots:** not a problem
- **Winter interest:** no
- **Outstanding tree:** no
- **Ozone sensitivity:** unknown
- **Verticillium wilt susceptibility:** resistant
- **Pest resistance:** resistant to pests/diseases

**Use and Management**

The lower leaves persist on the tree after they die, forming a dense, brown, shaggy covering below the living, grey/green, broad, fan-shaped leaves, giving it the common name of Petticoat Palm. These dead fronds are known to be a fire hazard and a popular bedding roost for rodents and, because of this, must be removed by law in some areas.

Plant this palm only on soil which is extremely well-drained to prevent trunk or root rot. Moderate salt tolerance allows it to be used close to the coast in several of the southern states. This palm could be tried more in well-drained sites as a replacement for *Washingtonia robusta* which grows very tall with a skinny trunk. But over-irrigation and rainy weather could initiate root rot. *Washingtonia filifera* is shorter, has a thicker trunk, and is better suited for planting in dry urban landscapes, such as in Texas, Arizona and California. They reportedly suffer and often die from root rot when irrigated. Select *Washingtonia robusta* in an irrigated landscape and for the eastern U.S.

Propagation is by seed.

**Pests**

Scales while young, palm weevil in old age, palm leaf skeletonizer and a variety of scales at any time can infest this palm.

**Diseases**

Trunk or root rot in wet soils may infect this tree.