



Mexican Fan Palm

Taxonomy

Order: Arecales

Family: Arecaceae

Species: *Washingtonia robusta* H.Wendl.

Summary

A large evergreen palm, small fast-growing mimosoid tree native to north western parts of Mexico; now naturalized in Florida, California, Spain, Italy. It is a popular landscape plant in areas where it is hardy throughout the world. In California, Florida and Hawaii it is considered as an invasive species due to competition with native plant communities in coastal wetland and beach habitats.



Washingtonia robusta © Geographer

Biology

Commonly cultivated in urban and residential areas, Mexican Fan Palm can form dense mature stands in riparian zones (banks of watercourses), roadsides, and on coastal foreshores and offshore islands in tropical and subtropical regions.

Inflorescences extend out from among the leaves in the spring and are followed by small black fruits later in the summer. The seeds germinate within about two weeks under warm and uniformly moist conditions but can take 3 months or more in less suitable conditions.

Distribution in Caribbean

There is a lack of precise data, but it appears to be common throughout the Caribbean region, including Anguilla and TCI in disturbed and natural habitats.

Pathway of Entry

Natural dispersal: Animals (particularly fruit eating birds), wind, and water disperse the seeds

Intentional dispersal: Spread long distances through the horticulture trade

Impact

Mexican fan palm is a common landscape ornamental that has become invasive in riparian areas, orchards and landscaped areas. This palm is known to create monospecific stands in riparian areas, and dead fronds of the tree can create a fire hazard. Seeds germinate readily in cracks in concrete and can damage masonry and sidewalks. Plants spread rapidly from cultivation, invade wetland areas, and crowd out native species.



Further Information:

<https://idtools.org/id/palms/palmid/factsheet.php?name=Washingtonia+robusta>

EBook: Henderson, A. *et al* (1995). Field Guide to the Palms of the Americas, Princeton University Press.



Washingtonia robusta flowers © Ginabovara



Thatch palm, *Coccothrinax inaguensis* leaves © Mike Green



Washingtonia robusta mature crown © Forest and Kim Starr



Silver palm, *Coccothrinax argentata* is native in TCI and one of the dominant plants in some areas © C. Malumphy

Field Description

The trunk or stem is solitary, tapered and swollen considerably at the base on mature specimens. It can reach 22 m tall and 80 cm diameter, and is covered with a skirt of marcescent leaves (unless removed for landscape appeal). Old leaf bases usually fall away after many years, to leave a smooth grey stem with closely spaced leaf scar rings.

Leaves are bright green and 'costapalmate', meaning they have a definite costa (midrib), but they are arranged radially like in a palmate leaf and form a compact crown. Leaflets are up to 1m long Induplicate, split about half the blade length into numerous segments with stiff tips and threads (marginal fibers) hanging between segments.

Petioles split, armed with curved teeth along orange-coloured margins. The adaxial hastula is prominent with tattered, papery margins. The base of the lower surface of the leaf blade densely covered with near white pubescence.

The inflorescence is up to 3 m long, projecting from the crown beyond the leaves, with numerous small pale orange-pink flowers. The fruit is a spherical, blue-black, 6–8 mm diameter; edible, though thin-fleshed.

Similar Species

May be confused with *Washingtonia filifera* (California Fan Palm). The former has a narrower trunk (which is typically somewhat wider at the base) and grows taller. *Washingtonia filifera* has greyish-green leaves forming an open crown while *W. robusta* has bright olive-green leaves with shorter petioles forming a dense crown. The two species hybridize freely, making identification difficult. *Washingtonia × filibusta* is a hybrid with intermediate characteristics of the two parents.

Fan palms in the genera *Brahea*, *Coccothrinax* and *Copernicia* are native to the Caribbean region and some species could be confused with *Washingtonia*. *Brahea* species can be distinguished by a combination of upper leaf colour and careful inspection of the leaf shape, fruit are slightly larger. Thatch palm, *Coccothrinax inaguensis*, is a common palm endemic to the Turks and Caicos found in coastal scrub, on sandy and limestone soil. It can be separated from *W. robusta* by trunk size (it grows to only 2-5m tall), and leaflets are less than half the length, lack white pubescence on the lower surface and the petioles lack teeth.