

HARDY TROPICALS FOR THE SUN

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POPULAR demand for the tropical look in contemporary planting seems to have increased within the past years in spite of prophecy to the contrary and despite the appearance of newer tricks in the trade. Generally speaking this insistence upon the big-leafed look is all very well where large-growing plants are required, or where there is a good deal of overhead or wall protection to afford considerable shade, and particularly in areas seldom visited by biting frosts.

But to achieve an acceptably bold effect, the landscape planner must learn the habits and limitations of the tropicals or semi-tropicals which he wishes to use, and then have the good grace to accept them in their own character instead of trying to make them into sizes and shapes they are not, or expecting them to thrive under conditions foreign to their natural habits. Some of our tropical plantings fail because of the planner's lack of skill with, or knowledge of, plant materials, and his eagerness to be dramatic.

If one really wants a tropical-looking planting in sun or shade, and is willing to be guided by the rules of nature (and perhaps a few by man) he may do rather well with the materials available, even with the vagaries of a not-very-tropical climate.

For framing, accenting, or even shading, there are no more fool-proof tropical plants than the palms: Washingtonias, Phoenix, Arecastrums, Trachycarpus, Chamaerops, Erytheas, etc.,—all perfectly cold-hardy, tolerant of any amount of sun and considerable shade, and frequently able to remain for a long time in soil and drainage not at all to their liking. And have these been used! For line value, accent, even screening, some color, and general "zip" we have the indefatigable *Phormium tenax*—green, gray-green, variegated, bronze, red-bronze, fairly tall. It will grow in sun, shade, wet, or drought, in almost any soil, from Las Vegas to Muscle Beach and from 'way up north in Oregon to well below the Equator. Palms can be very effective, tied down with a very dwarf bamboo, *Sasa pygmaea*, or the silver clumping grass, *Festuca glauca*.

Along with palms, or in place of, for height and line value in the tropical manner, nothing is harder to sun and cold than *Cordyline australis*, mistakenly known in the trade as *Dracena indivisa* (the true *D. indivisa* has 6" wide leaves, is less cold-hardy, and seldom seen in California). This Cordyline we have is the New Zealand Palm Lily, eventually achieving 25' or more, but slowly, and resembles a Yucca superficially. The most arresting form is the bronze one, *Cordyline australis atropurpurea*,

of deep red bronze, or its seedling variant with pale greenish-gray-bronze leaves suggesting the patina on pewter. Then there are the true Yuccas, *Yucca recurvifolia* (most common) with widish drooping gray-green leaves in many-headed rosettes, their trunks possessing a driftwood quality. *Yucca filamentosa* is similar but with narrower thready leaves, hardy to zero or lower. The Joshua Tree, *Yucca brevifolia* is hardy and sun-loving but unsuccessful in the coastal region. And *Yucca Whipplei*, the Lord's Candle, is for dry plantings only. *Yucca aloifolia* on the other hand is suitable and adaptable to any sunny tropical planting where the bayonet-like leaves don't interfere with traffic.

A related genus harmonious with palms, flax (*Phormium*), cordylines, and the like, is the aloe, *Aloe arborescens* being the best known and most available. For color it is unsurpassed at Christmas time with its great spires of orange-red. Other species, many low and spreading, are available and will bloom later, some into May, all in nearby color range.

Then there are the grasses, and the bamboos—from almost flat to two-stories tall, mostly hardy, loving of sun and water (most will also thrive in shade as well); many species and varieties, from thin and open and delicate to coarse and heavy-caned. *Sasa palmata* (five feet), *Sasa tessellata* (six feet), *Pseudosasa japonica* (6'-8'), *Bambusa multiplex*, "variety" 'Chinese Goddess' (6'), and *Bambusa multiplex*, "var." 'Alphonse Karr' (10', with pink young canes, deep yellow mature canes striped chartreuse): are all outstanding and all available. Among the grasses one of the most usable is *Arrhenatherum bulbosum* and related varieties in varying pattern and height, mostly quite low.

Similar to bamboo in feeling but completely unrelated is the so-called Heavenly Bamboo, *Nandina domestica*, which is not tropical at all but serves well in almost any dilemma, and has the particular interest of bloom, berries, and in the winter, lovely fern-like leaves turning firey red.

Other subjects for red or bronze foliage contrast include the fascinating *Dodonaea viscosa atropurpurea*, 6'-10', open, of wonderful pattern value, surprisingly effective contrast to the big-leaved "tropicals"; *Acokanthera venenata* and *A. spectabilis*, heavy-leaved, very bronze to dull green with good clusters of marble-like berries (said to be somewhat poisonous), to 10'-20' but very slowly; and *Catha edulis*, a shiny bronze and green shrub with fine red stems, the most color with the maximum hot sun and cold nights, the plant adaptable by intelligent pruning from four to ten feet, and even espaliered.

For actually shading an area conceived in the tropical motif, there are several heat-tolerant and frost-enduring trees—*Aralia foliosa* and *A. chinensis*, both rather slow-growing umbrellas to 20', of spiny fern-like leaves, easy of culture but insistent on good drainage; *Chiranthodendron platanoides*—the Monkey Hand tree, extremely fast, and only half-hardy (25°F. when well established), with large dusty-green leaves bearing tan tomentum beneath and wonderful beige flocking on leaf stems and younger branches, and conversation-piece blossoms of dark red, cup-shaped, out of the center of which protrudes a hand-like formation of brighter red with bright yellow backside. Of further interest the blossoms of this handsome Mexican tree dries into seed pods which suggest the Hawaiian woodrose; *Eriobotrya japonica*, the common Loquat, effective as a small to medium tree, espaliered, or as a great shrub, too common to be appreciated in spite of its magnificent furrowed leaves, interesting blossoms, and decorative edible fruits; and *Ficus macrophylla*, the Moreton Bay Fig, a fast-growing magnificent tree—too large for most plantings, but usable in limited areas where little underplanting is necessary, amenable to yearly root pruning (the famous semi-espaliered one in the patio of El Paseo in Santa Barbara is a good example of such a use, even without root pruning, and the adjoining foundations are still there, too). This is the only evergreen ficus which once well-established can endure consistently rather cold winters. Three other hardy, sun-loving evergreen trees adaptable to tropical effect, either for shading or massed for foliage and flower effects are the *Magnolia grandiflora* and its dwarf variant, *M. exoniensis* (20'), both too well known to warrant discussion; *Stenocarpus sinuatus*, the beautiful Firewheel Tree, still too little known and used, its great oak-like glossy leaves a wonderful foil for masses of wheel-like flame-colored flowers intermittent throughout the year; and *Talauma hodgsoni*, of the *Magnoliaceae*, a slow-growing small tree, displaying leathery leaves 20" long and 9" across, surrounding terminal 6" ivory-petaled flowers with purplish-blue sepals.

Another hardy tree of tropical aspect which may occasionally find a place where an incredible root structure above ground is desirable is the almost deciduous Argentine Ombu, *Phytolacca dioica*, its limb structure as well as above-ground roots a natural, in free-form

design.

Leafy fillers, 4'-12', which may be depended upon to retain their mass value throughout most winters and incidentally add some much-craved "color," include *Alpinia nutans* (speciosa), the hardiest of all the gingers and in some respects the most beautiful with its bronzy leaf sheaths and pendulous clusters of shell-like white and reddish flowers; *Malvaviscus mollis*, Turk's Cap, a great fuzzy shrub of large golden-green leaves and scarlet hibiscus-like blossoms; the ever-adaptable handsome *Melianthus major* whose swirls of gray-green toothed and deepcut foliage pile up and spill so effectively out of over-size sunny raised plantings, islands and redwood tubs, and is particularly effective in association with *Acokanthera* and bronze *Phormium*, even picking up that red-bronze quality with its own maroon-colored curiously spiked blossoms in late winter and early spring.

One of the boldest of all tropical-looking plants of large scale where its vicious needles can be well out of contact, is the endlessly hardy century plant *Agave americana glauca*, much more commonly used in the Mediterranean and other subtropical regions than here. And a half-hardy, sun-tolerant formal-looking rosette is the bright green Spearlily, *Doryanthes palmeri*, to ten feet across and high at maturity, eventually throwing a spike of red bracted flowers many feet high. Equally effective where space permits and the giant grassy look is wanted is Pampas Grass, *Cortaderia selloana*, with great feather-like plumes of pale beige to ivory to pinkish mauve.

Smaller-scale subjects for line value include Joint Grass, *Equisetum hiemale*, particularly striking for its vertical quality and joint pattern, and especially valuable in over watered or poorly drained places; the several *Moraeas* for their wonderful leaves and delicate iris-like flowers; and any of the *Dianellas* for further narrow sword-like leaves and the amazing detail of their spikes of indigo seedpods.

Ground-covers are usually over used and particularly as cover between good looking specimens. The cleverer plantsman will insist upon *not* tying everything down with a thicket of Algerian ivy. He may use a subtly colored (not Kelly green) roofing aggregate or plain pea gravel, or just plain tan-colored decomposed granite, or be completely radical and have clean black well-tilled earth showing, lightly mulched with leafmold.

THE ROBIN

"The Robin is the one
That speechless from her nest
Submits that home and certainty
And sanctity are best."

EMILY DICKINSON



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