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Trachycarpus - Growing Guide

Growing Trachycarpus

Visitors to Cornish gardens cannot fail to have noticed the huge mature fan palms which grow so well in coastal and woodland locations since they were first introduced from China in the 1860s. Some are now 50-70ft or more tall and Burncoose garden has some fine examples growing around the pond and hidden away in a camellia grove under a tall beech canopy. Trachycarpus fortunei came to Caerhays shortly after 1900 but visitors would have to look hard to find them as they are tucked away in a wood opposite the lake and not in the main garden. All along the south coast of England these Chusan palms are key features of planting in coastal resorts but they are now being used as architectural features in new developments in cities and on roundabouts. Despite its tropical appearance T. fortunei is totally hardy throughout the UK and has withstood the worst salt laden gales and cold seen in the last century.

T. fortunei is a single stemmed palm (unlike Chamaerops humilis) with a head of huge fan shaped dark green leaves which can readily be 30 or more inches long with numerous pointed segments. The segments are joined for about half the length of each leaf.

When mature trachycarpus have long fibrous trunks. This fibre is attractive to many small birds seeking to create their nests but has a commercial use in China in rope making. With us, flowering occurs when the trunk is around 6-8ft tall. Trachycarpus tend to flower well the year after a baking hot summer and there is no guarantee that flowers will appear every year. Separate male and female palms are needed to produce fertile seeds although some palms have both male and female flowers.

The flowers themselves appear from below the crown in early summer as enormous pendant panicles of yellow flowers which, when fully out, can be 2-3ft long on larger more mature palms. Quite phallic in fact as the flower bud develops before opening.

Female palms produce blue-black marble sized fruits. These are easy to germinate when ripe and, in warmer areas where the palm is surrounded by bare dry earth, it is not unusual to see a fine crop of initially single leaved seedlings appearing naturally. Seeds can be sown in the autumn but will germinate quickly if kept dry over winter and sown in the spring.

Some shelter for the huge fronds from strong winds is advisable although these palms can take a real battering and still produce a good crop of new fan leaves in the next season.

A few years ago we also started growing Trachycarpus wagnerianus outdoors at Caerhays alongside T. fortunei. This species has proved equally hardy and, although it is said to generate several stems or trunks in maturity, ours have shown no sign of this as yet. The slightly strange characteristic of T. wagnerianus is that its roots appear to rise to the surface around the trunk which then stands proud to the ground. The leaves of T. wagnerianus are smaller than the much more common T. fortunei and equally ornate. Well worth trying if you perhaps do not quite have enough room for T. fortunei.

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