

Coconut and Other Palm Trees

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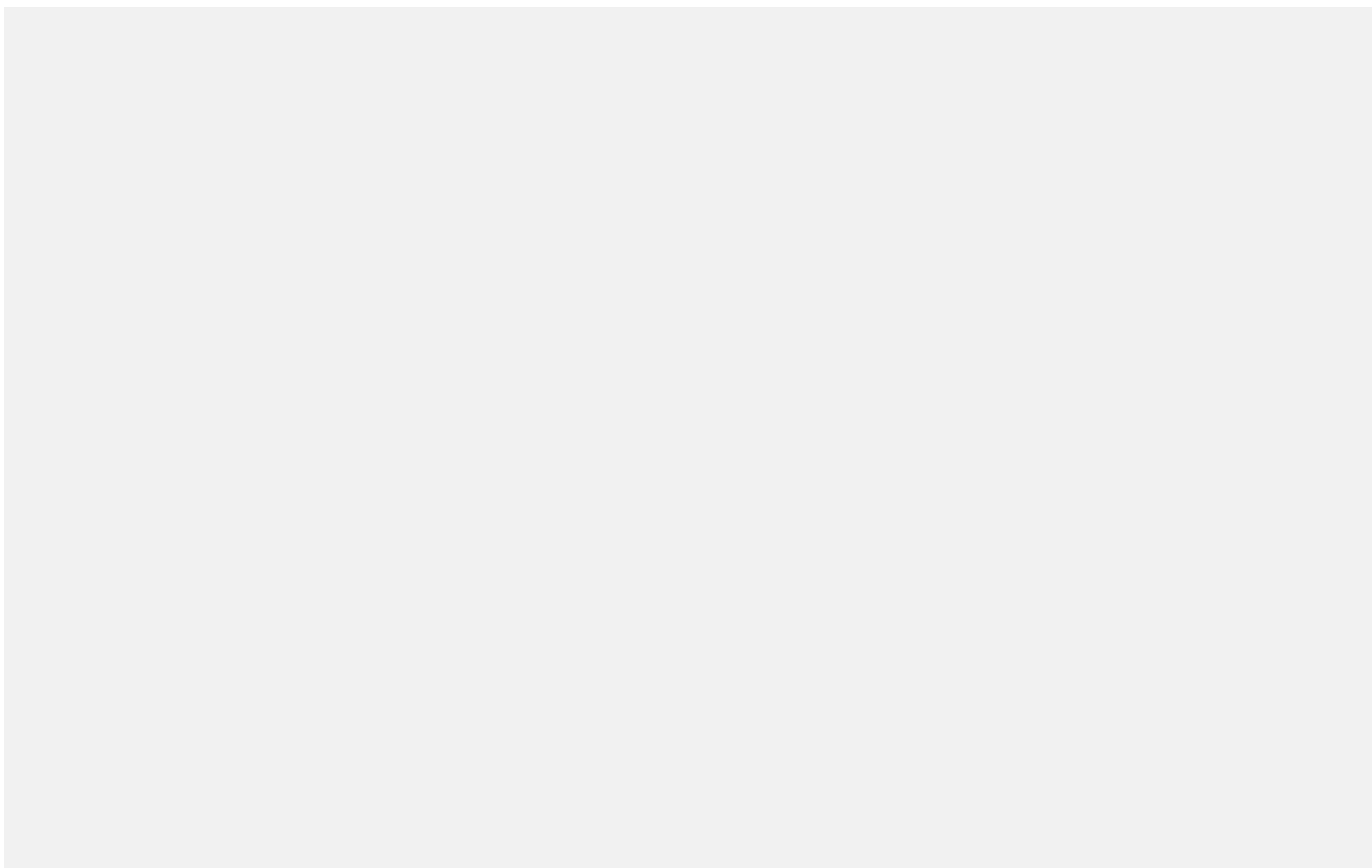
Of all the types of palm trees, many people here in Hawai‘i are most familiar with the coconut palm, *Cocos nucifera*. It’s the tree that says, “tropics.”

But there’s so much more to the coconut palm. Its fruit, the niu or coconut, is so useful that early Polynesians brought it along to sustain themselves when they sailed across the Pacific to Hawai‘i.

Polynesians knew that when they settled on new islands, they could plant coconuts and make use of the entire tree that grew—not only the coconut meat and water, but also the leaves, the wood, the fiber, and every other part. According to the book [Canoe Plants of Ancient Hawaii](#), “Besides drink, food and shade, niu offers the possibilities of housing, thatching, hats, baskets, furniture, mats, cordage, clothing, charcoal, brooms, fans, ornaments, musical instruments, shampoo, containers, implements and oil for fuel, light, ointments, soap and more.”

The only palm tree that’s native to Hawai‘i is the [loulu](#) (*Pritchardia*). There are perhaps 19 [loulu species](#) in Hawai‘i and a few related species in Tahiti and Fiji. Hawai‘i used to have large loulu forests, but while some loulu still survive in the wild, many disappeared because of rats, pigs, goats, and even people.

Within the genus *Pritchardia*, there are 25 species of palms native to the tropical Pacific Islands. In Hawai‘i, as many as 19 species of *Pritchardia* are endemic, and some of them are categorized as endangered, rare, or vulnerable. There is at least one distinct *Pritchardia* species on each Hawaiian island. Some of the islands even have distinct species or forms that exist only within an individual valley or mountain.





Pritchardia beccariana – Beccari's Loulu



Syagrus romanzoffiana – Queen Palm

There are also many other types of palm tree, of course—we know of around 2600 palm species and perhaps 180 genera. Palms can be climbers, shrubs, stemless plants, or trees. They are flowering plants in the monocot order Arecales, which contains only one family, Arecaceae (also known as Palmae).

Other types of palms offer other various products. The African tree *Ealeis guineensis* provides palm oil; the Asian toddy palm *Caryota urens* supplies palm sugar (elephants love to eat that palm); and the betel nut palm (*Areca catechu*) offers up betel nuts, which are stimulants.

Some other interesting palm facts:

- Eighteenth-century Franciscan missionaries are said to have brought the first palm trees—date palms (*Phoenix canariensis*)—to Southern California.
- Palm Beach County in Florida got its name after a Spanish brig, carrying 20,000 coconuts just harvested in



Areca catechu – Yellow Betel Nut Palm

Trinidad, wrecked in 1878 and those coconuts washed up all along the coast. People planted the coconuts around their homes and down their streets, the area became known for its palms, and the county became named for them.

- Los Angeles got its palm-lined streets when the city put unemployed Depression-era men to work planting 25,000 palm trees along 150 miles of city streets. That was just before the 1932 World Olympics.

You'll find a "Palm Jungle" full of naturalized Alexander (*Archontophoenix alexandrae*) palms at Hawaii Tropical Botanical Garden. The Garden also has some loulu palms, including *Pritchardia beccariana*, a species endemic to wet forests on the eastern side of Hawai'i.

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