

Sago Palm Care from BonsaiOutlet.com

General Background:

The Sago Palm, though it resembles a palm, is not a palm at all. A member of the cycad genus, these ancient plants dominated the terrain during the Mesozoic era over 150 million years ago. The indestructibility and durability of the Sago Palm is legendary. Not only did they outlive the dinosaurs, but they can often survive severely adverse forces of nature and oversights of mankind. Native to Japan's southernmost islands, Sago Palms make intriguing and elegant Bonsai, indoors or outdoors. *Cycas revoluta* is one of the most primitive living seed plants, and as such are very unusual and popular ornamentals. A rugged trunk, topped with whorled feathery leaves has led to the common name "Sago Palm", however it is actually related to conifer and Ginkgo trees which are all cone bearing plants that trace their origins back to the ancient flora of the early Mesozoic era. Sometimes called "living fossils", Sago palms have changed very little in the last 200 million years.

Trees Features:

The Sago Palm has shiny dark-green leaves with a rigid mid-rib and glossy leaflets that curl along the edge growing in a circular pattern. The trunk is thick and shaggy, much like a palm tree. Regardless of age or size, *Cycas revoluta* is one of the easiest Bonsai plants to grow, indoors or out, by beginner or expert. This subtropical adapts to a wide range of temperatures from 15 to 110 degrees F (-11 to 42 degrees C), accepts full sun or bright interior light, thrives with attention, and tolerates neglect.

Temperature:

The Sago Palm is extremely hardy and can survive in temperatures ranging from 15° F. to 110°. Temperatures in the high teens may cause frost-damage to the leaves which may turn yellow or brown; if this occurs, you will need to remove them to reduce stress on the plant and encourage new leaves in the spring. If temperatures fall below 15, the sago may die, however, as long as the trunk and leaf crown is hard wood, it could recover. If the trunk turns soft, your sago may be damaged beyond recovery. In general, it is best to be safe and simply move your Sago Palm inside in the fall before the first frost. In the spring, when night temperatures no longer drop below 50° F. return the Bonsai to its outdoor spot.

Lighting:

Sago Palms enjoy full sun, but can adapt to outdoor shade or indoor areas with bright light or a few hours of morning or afternoon sun. Low light will produce long leaves, while bright light will produce shorter leaves. If you do not place indoor Sago Palm in enough light when it gets new leaves, they will stretch toward what little light there is becoming long and leggy which is undesirable in a Bonsai. If the light is not directly overhead, turn the tree about a quarter of the way around each day so new leaves will not lean in one direction. Once the leaves have had a chance to harden, this adjustment will no longer be necessary.

Watering:

You will want to keep your Sago Palm well drained and in soil that is rich in humus. Although these durable plants seem to grow in almost anything it is important that you are careful to ensure that your Sago Palm is slightly above the soil line and not in a hole or depression which retains water or is "swampy"; Sago Palms much prefer to be on the dry than the wet side. Because they give very little indication of when to water, they should be treated as a cactus and watered when almost dry. If your Bonsai is receiving morning or afternoon sun or experiencing warmer temperatures you may need to water your Sago Palm weekly. If your Bonsai is growing in low light or cooler temperatures you may only need to water every few weeks. Because this plant is so drought tolerant, it is perfect for the beginner or for the individual that needs to travel.

Fertilizing:

Your Sago Palm can be fertilized 3-4 times per year. It is especially important to fertilize when new growth appears in the spring and again in late summer to help your palm adapt to cooler temperatures. Use an organic liquid fertilizer diluted to one half strength. Water your tree before fertilizing and take care not to fertilize a weak or freshly repotted tree because this will add stress to the tree by burning the roots. With Sago Palms, too little plant food is far better than too much. If organic or slow release fertilizer is used, do not allow any to fall into the plant crown which is protecting the formation of future leaves. Too much fertilizer can cause yellowing of leaves.

Pruning / Training:

The Sago Palm grows very slowly so very little pruning is needed. It does not need training with wire to look great as a Bonsai and regular pruning should be all that is

needed to keep your Palm in shape. You can prune your Sago Palm throughout the year by removing any yellow or brown leaves. Cut the leaf stalk near the Bonsai's trunk or remove individual sections at the leaf's midrib, preserving the remaining leaflets. Sit at eye level with your Bonsai tree and use Bonsai trimming shears. Your cuts should be smooth or slightly concave so the wound will heal quickly. If the cut surface is brown, you will want to add pruning paint to the surface. Pruning leaves on your Sago palm should be done at least once a year to keep it looking good. Oldest and lowest leaves eventually have brown tips or turn brown which is its natural way of allowing the plants energy to go to growing new leaves and so these leaves should be removed taking care to cut as close to the trunk as possible. Any leaf turning yellow or brown should be removed from the plant right away. If new leaves emerge yellow or distorted, then you have probably been over or under fertilizing. Cut them off immediately so that your Bonsai will start making a new set of leaves. It will add a set of new leaves every 1-2 years in some conditions and up to three sets a year in ideal conditions. New leaves grow all at once around the trunk. They remain tender for several weeks, during which time the tree should be treated gently and receive good light.

Insects / Pests:

Pests tend to be limited to scale which can form a white or gray crust, or occasional attacks of mealy bugs. Use an insecticidal soap or a product labeled for scale. In all cases, use caution and follow the directions on the container. Always water your plant before treatment or spraying during the coolest part of the day or morning. Otherwise, the combination of heat, direct sun, and insecticide can burn leaves

Propagation:

Propagation is achieved with seeds or removal of offshoots called "pups". Soak the seed in water for several days, and then remove the red skin, leaving the white hard seed coat. They can be planted immediately, or kept in a cool, dry place until March or April. Plant seed sideways, leaving the top edge exposed, in well drained moist-not soggy-soil. The seed will germinate in 3-9 months, but may require more than three years of growth to reach a small bulb size 1" in diameter. To propagate with offshoots or "pups", you will find an excellent source of new plants growing at the base or along the sides of mature Sago's. Remove the offshoots in early spring, late fall or winter by using a hand trowel to pop them from the trunk side, or use a sharp-shooter shovel to dig and gently crow-bar large ones from the base of the plant. Remove all the pups' leaves and roots and set them aside for the raw spot to dry for a week or so. Plant your

harvested “pups” in well-drained soil or a sandy mixture so that half the ball or trunk is below soil level taking care to water thoroughly, allow the soil to dry thoroughly before watering again. Keep the started plants in a shady or bright indoor area for several months until the first leaves appear several months later and at that time, apply a mild dose of fertilizer and water when almost, but not completely dry. Allow the new plants to form a good root system before repotting into a larger container or planting in your garden or landscape. Please keep in mind that massive pup removal can be very hard work on large Sago’s with lots of offshoots.

Repotting:

The Sago Palm should be repotted in the spring or summer. This Bonsai prefers to be root bound and should be repotted into a container only slightly larger than the root system taking care to not fully enclose the roots in the soil. When repotting, you will want to lightly trim the roots and then be sure to remove a comparable amount of lower leaves. After repotting, water thoroughly and do not fertilize for 3-4 weeks.

Additional Comments:

Sago palms are known for their extremely slow growth. When grown as potted indoor specimens, they may add only one set of new leaves every year or two and remain somewhat the same size, which is one reason they are so excellent for Bonsai. The seed and plant parts of *Cycas revoluta* are not for consumption and are often confused with a true palm tree *Mextroxylon*, which is also called Sago Palm, which is used for food in tropical countries. When in doubt, be sure to refer to the Latin name, which will point you in the right direction.

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