

Palms

Palm trees belong to the family Arecaceae. While the coconut tree has been cultivated in India for ages, the foxtail palm is a much more recent addition to Mumbai. (In 2017, though, 1000 foxtail palms were planted in Andheri to prevent illegal parking!)

Also described are the royal palm and the jaggery/fishtail palm, both are common in Mumbai too.



Coconut Tree

Species name: *Cocos nucifera*

The coconut tree is certainly one of the most widely known and easily recognisable trees in Mumbai. Some memories associated with coconut trees- like fresh, delicious nariyal pani (the liquid within coconuts that is drunk in India)- are good, while others- like neighbours' car windows being smashed by falling coconuts- are certainly not. Unless you live in a building with limited parking space. Then, you celebrate a neighbour's smashed car windows.

Coconuts have played a significant role in human progress and development as they are an easily transportable form of both food and water, and so have helped humans travel and set up trade routes.

The coconut tree is a perennial palm that is grown in over 80 countries, and is the only surviving species in the *Cocos* genus. Two main types are tall and dwarf varieties. Tall cultivars tend to first produce flowers later than dwarf cultivars (they mature slower). The leaves of a coconut tree can be up to 4-6m long.

Coconut trees are widely grown in tropical areas, particularly in coastal regions. Indonesia is the world's largest producer of coconuts, producing approximately 17 million metric tons annually. India- especially the southern states- and the Philippines are also among the world's leading coconut producers.

The fruit of the coconut tree is a one-seeded drupe that is adapted for dispersal by sea currents. It contains coconut water, which is widely drunk in India. Coconut water displays antioxidant activity and may also help protect the heart and kidney.

Coconut Oil:

Copra is the dried white region of the coconut from which coconut oil can be produced. It is edible and has multiple different functions, including making soap and cosmetics. The demand for coconut oil is rising in several industries, with increasing attention to the fact that it can be used for biolubricants or biofuels.

In experiments, the lauric acid in coconut oil, which has antimicrobial properties, has been seen to reduce the HIV virus.

Applying coconut oil on the scalp and hair is an old Indian practice. It is believed to be a lubricant (and so prevent tangles), display antimicrobial properties, and is thought to enter the hair shaft and reduce protein loss from hair.

The origin of coconut cultivation is unknown and coconuts are now cultivated across the globe, but some scientists hypothesise that there were two independent origins of coconut cultivation: one in the Indian subcontinent and one in Southeast Asia.

Read on to learn about the foxtail palm!

Common name: Foxtail palm tree

Scientific name: *Wodyetia bifurcata*

Native: Australia



The genus, “*Wodyetia*” is named after an Australian aboriginal man, Wodyeti, who introduced the foxtail palm to botanists in 1978 and is considered the last of his kind to possess traditional knowledge of these palms, which are native to Queensland.

The common name is due to the shape of the fronds of the palm, which look like the fluffy tail of a fox. Fruits are orange or red, and the palm grows relatively fast.

After the tree became known worldwide in 1978, it soon became popular and sought-after across the globe. Cape Melville, an isolated part of Queensland, was initially the only place where the foxtail palm grew. Hence, an illegal trade of smuggling seeds of the foxtail palm for nurseries grew.

These foxtail palms also resulted in an Australian political scandal: Pat Shears, a Vietnamese war veteran and park ranger, upon allegedly finding vehicles with chainsaws in the national park, decided to drive away one of the vehicles to the Cooktown police station. It became apparent that the vehicle belonged to the brother of Queensland’s Premier’s principal private secretary, resulting in the private secretary and his brother being accused of smuggling the seeds of foxtail palms. This resulted in a significant political scandal. The private secretary’s name was later cleared but his brother was fined for carrying a chainsaw in a national park.

Read on to learn about some more beautiful Mumbai palms!



Royal Palm/ Cuban Royal Palm

Species: *Roystonea regia*

Native to Cuba, some Caribbean islands, south Florida, and Mexico, royal palm trees are large, majestic palms that can grow up to 30 metres! The royal palm is the national tree of Cuba, where the fruits are fed to pigs. The leaves of the tree are sometimes used for thatching.



Fishtail Palm/ Jaggery Palm

Species: *Caryota urens*

Native: India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Myanmar
An evergreen palm with twice-feathered leaves that grow up to 6 m long and fruits that are red when ripe, the jaggery palm can be seen across Mumbai.

The stem can be fashioned into a utensil to collect water from wells and the leaves are used to make baskets. When boiled, the sap can be made into 'jaggery' sugar.

In Sri Lanka, the sap is used to make a sweetener called kithul.