

The Jurassic Garden

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Sunday, January 19, 2003



Coontie is a native cycad that dates back to prehistoric times.

Florida has the ideal climate for the Jurassic Park garden; hot, humid and swampy. There is something fascinating about the plants that existed in the era when dinosaurs roamed the earth. The great lizards have long since passed, but an amazing number of the plants that they grazed upon, or hunted among, are still flourishing today. In fact, many plants that grow in our area are identical to fossil plants from millions of years ago.

The first land plants were mosses, rootless airplants like our familiar Spanish moss (*Tillandsia usneoides*), which appeared over 430 million years ago. Among the oldest survivors of this group is the Whisk Fern (*Psilotum nudum*). This lovely moss looks like a sea-fan on a coral reef.

The next on the scene were the club-mosses. Modern examples that do well here include peacock moss (*Selaginella uncinata*), and arborvitae fern (*Selaginella ledidophylla*).

Around 400 million years ago, the Horsetails (*Equisetum* spp.) appeared. The horsetails beautifully jointed, reed-like habit is best suited for container culture in small ponds and water features.

Ferns dominated the landscape beginning about 350 million years ago. Some of the best of this widely diverse group for the modern Jurassic garden include maidenhair (*Adiantum capillus-veneris*), ladyfern (*Anthyrium filix-femina*), and autumn fern (*Dryopteris erythrosora*). The Australian tree-fern (*Cyathea cooperii*) closely resembles the majestic ferns of this era. It does well in our gardens, with some winter protection.

Just over 200 million years ago the actual Jurassic period began. This was also the era when true seed-bearing plants, the conifers and their kin, came to prominence. Examples of this group that exist today include gopherwood or torrey pine (*Torreya* spp.), still found in pockets along the Apalachicola Bluffs area, and bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) a prominent species in area wetlands. The dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) was once thought to be extinct, and was known only from the fossil record. Just after World War II, a stand was discovered in western China, propagated, and the dawn redwood has become a favored tree throughout the temperate regions.

Two of the most interesting of the early seed plants that still exist in our area are the monkey-puzzle tree (*Araucara araucana*), with its bizarrely patterned habit and stiff spiky leaves, and the ginko (*Ginko biloba*), which has unique fan-shaped leaves and fantastic golden fall color. Cycads are another of the relics of this period. Sago palm (*Cycas revoluta*) is widely used in our area. Other species from this group that will grow well here are dioon (*Dioon edule*), which looks much like sago only with silvery foliage, and coontie (*Zamia pumila*), a low growing native of the Panhandle.

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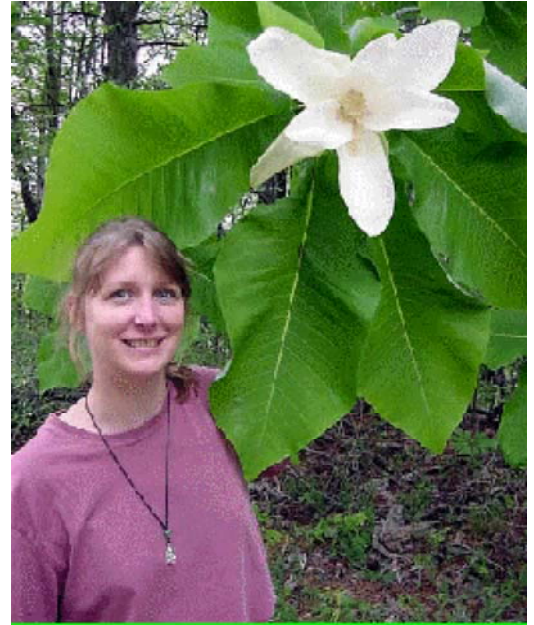
The final stage of the dinosaur period saw the rise of flowering plants. These plants became the extremely diverse group that dominates the landscape today. Among the oldest flowering plants are magnolias, laurels, barberry, and palms. Outstanding specimens from this group that you can add to your dinosaur garden include Ashe magnolia (*Magnolia ashii*) and big-leaf magnolia (*Magnolia macrophylla*). An interesting laurel is the culinary bayleaf (*Laurus nobilis*). Cold hardy palms that are well suited to North Florida include pindo palm (*Butia capitata*), needle palm (*Rhapidophyllum hystrix*), and windmill palm (*Trachycarpus fortuneii*).

So plant your very own Jurassic Park, and just be glad that the biggest herbivore we have to deal with in our gardens is an occasional deer. Can you imagine having dinosaurs grazing in your yard?

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Photos: Coontie by Mark Shelby, UF-IFAS Extension Bigleaf magnolia by Ashland High School Horticulture Dept, Ashland Ohio.

[\[Back\]](#)



The bigleaf magnolia, a native magnolia, has huge leaves