

**Informationen zur Umwelt und für Naturreisende auf Kreta:**
Information about the Environment and for travellers in Crete:

Cretan Date Palm (*Phoenix theophrastii*)



Besides the Canary Island Date Palm (*Phoenix canariensis*), the Real Date Palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) and the European Fan Palm (*Chamaerops humilis*) which are originally not indigenous on Crete, you met on a view places at Crete the **Cretan Date Palm** (*Phoenix theophrastii*). It occurs as endemic species in Europe only on Crete (and on the South-western coast of Turkey). It is (besides the European Fan Palm) the only European Palm species. It is strictly protected at their Cretan sites and rarely found in cultures. Known sites on Crete are especially the Palm Beach of Vai (see info leaflet No. 102-05/E) and the one from Preveli (see leaflet No. 055-04/E at www.kreta-umweltforum.de/NLUK_en.htm). Minor occurrences are located at the Souda Bay and Amoudi Beach, East and West of Plakias. As a leftover of pre-ice age thermal period, the Cretan Date Palm has survived at a few estuaries of all-year water-carrying creeks and rivers.

The Cretan Date Palm looks like the European Fan Palm, it only remains fully grown somewhat smaller (up to 10 m), and makes strong arms (multi-stemmed). She is the most robust of all Phoenix types and briefly withstands frosts up to minus 8- minus 10 ° C, which explains also its relatively high northern distribution. The Cretan relatives also differs from the originating in North Africa Phoenix Palm by that you rather quickly spit out the fruit as to eat; they are edible, but by far not as tasty as of the true Date Palm.



The fig. right shows a small Palm island with the Cretan Date Palm on the beach of Itanos/Vai
Picture: U. Kluge (2005)

With its compact appearance and its silver-grey, spiky leaves and bushy tribes the Cretan Date Palm is not without philological basis of Botany recognized as own species.



Fig. right: seeds of Cretan Date Palm

The Palm as “tree of life” in the ancient Greece



The Palm was in ancient times a sign of life, of hope, of victory and was an attribute of the martyrs. This tree of life is a daily mythological symbol of religious rites throughout ancient history of Greek art. He appears as sacred Palm icon on a golden **Vapphio Cup** of Minoan Crete (see **fig.**). Later, black and red grained vases show Dionysius kneeling before a Palm or offering a sacrifice to a full blown Palm on the altar.



Also the Greek literature is full of relations to the sacred tree. In Homer's epos Odysseus, the hero speaks in front of a growing Palm tree on the altar of Apollo, which is unique to any other growing tree on earth. In Homer's Hymn of Apollo, Apollo's mother is grabbing a Palm tree, while her son is born.

Many stories tell of the Athenian visit to Delphi after the Persian war, to consecrate a bronze Palm tree with Golden fruits to the Goddess Athena. Also at the symbols of the Cretan hieroglyphs (Linear A, Linear B) are the Palm and the Palm branch to see.



The fig. above show a Phoenix Palm, how to see them in Crete in front gardens, roadsides and in almost all resorts; fig. right: multiple fruit in detail.

Pictures: *K. Eckl* (2005)

Fig. right shows a Minoan Vapphio Gold-Cup with Palm and bull motif; high 7.9 cm.

