

Dates

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Date palms are very slow to get started, but are rewarding and easy-to-grow plants.

Date palms are large, exotic plants with big, spiky leaves. In the wild they produce large trunks, but in the house they remain a lot smaller, reaching about 1.5m. The plants you raise at home are unlikely to produce any dates, but because they look so glamorous, they are worth growing. As the plants get quite large, they are best in a conservatory, but while they are still small, they are good for a sunny windowsill.

How to grow a date palm

Dates have a large single stone in the middle of the fruit, which you can either spit out when you eat the fruit or cut out with a knife. Date stones are very hard, which means you can't just sow them, you have to give them a special treatment first. Seeds will only grow once water has soaked through their coats to the middle. If a seed has got a thick coat, it takes longer for the water to get inside the seed, and longer for it to start growing. The date stone is so hard that we must help the water get inside before it will grow.

Clean the stones in some warm water to remove any stickiness, and dry them with tissue. Rub each stone with sandpaper until the whole surface becomes rough.

Put some moist multi-purpose compost into a clear plastic bag such as a sandwich bag. Put your date stones in the bag, tie the top and put it in a very warm, dark place, like an airing cupboard.

It will take a long time for the stones to grow, but you should check them every day. As long as you use a clear plastic bag, you can inspect the stones without actually opening the top.

If the compost looks dry, open the bag and give the seed a little water, but don't give it too much or the stones might rot. When the stones do grow, you will notice a root sticking out of one end of the stone.

Take all the stones that have rooted and plant them in separate pots filled with multi-purpose compost. Plant the stones upright with the root at the bottom. Bury them about 2cm deep in compost and place the pots on a warm, light windowsill. Eventually the leaves will appear.

As the seedlings grow, they will need to be repotted. Date palms do not like being in pots which are too big for them, so when you repot them, put them in a

pot just 2cm larger than the previous one. Also, when you repot, you need to use John Innes No 2 instead of the compost used before. They prefer this because it is more like their natural soil.

Caring for your date palm

When your seedlings first start to grow, they will have long, narrow baby leaves. Spiky adult ones will appear when the plant is older. Dates need warm temperatures and bright light, so grow them on a sunny windowsill or in a conservatory. Water the plants regularly, and as long as you have used John Innes No 2, you won't need to feed your date plants for two or three years.

