

# Businesses import a slice of paradise Trendy palm trees, other tropical foliage add exotic atmosphere

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**T**o the lighted signs, utility poles and other roadside clutter typical of commercial strips, add a more exotic feature: palm trees.

In Ocean City and Fells Point -- even in Timonium -- restaurants and businesses have imported a slice of paradise, crafting gardens studded with palms, banana plants and other tropical foliage.

Surfside 7, on the South River near Annapolis, has lured customers with an outdoor deck shaded by eight stately palms. Parrot Island near Fells Point created an island atmosphere with 30 palms and a outdoor thatched bar.

And in Timonium -- where the closest body of water is a reservoir -- 45 palms gently sway in the breeze at Michael's restaurant, reaching into the sky along with the golden arches across York Road.

"If you don't look at York Road, you feel like you're down the ocean," Tony DiPaulo, owner of the nearby Turf Inn, says of the banana plant and other foliage at his restaurant.

The trend apparently started at restaurants in Ocean City. It spread along the coast, reaching the Annapolis area and the **Inner Harbor**, before leapfrogging to the heart of Baltimore County.

"It's a very big thing every spring," says Ray DeMott, co-owner of Redland Nursery in Homestead, Fla., which delivers more than 600 palm trees a year throughout the Northeast. "Every year, we pick up one or two more customers."

And it's mostly a repeat service, considering the palms -- which cost about \$600 each -- usually don't survive freezing temperatures and brutal blizzards. "It keeps us in business," DeMott says.

Adds brother John DeMott, also a co-owner of the nursery, "Think of them as annuals that have to be replaced every year. Or like seasonal Christmas trees."

Surfside 7 already has planned for the cold weather. The palms have been shipped to Florida for the winter.

"They're on vacation in Miami until next summer," owner Jerry Osuna says with a laugh.

But as colder weather arrives, most of the area's tropical plants are doomed.

"I get asked all the time, 'Are they going to live through the winter,' " says Kathleen Horton, a hostess at Michael's. "It's driving me crazy."

Along York Road, suburbanites seem to be searching for a reprieve from a commercial corridor clogged with motorists, buses, fast-food restaurants and gas stations.

"I saw the palm trees and started showing up here," says Bill Richardson of Columbia, eating lunch outdoors recently at the Turf Inn, under the shade of two palms and near broad-leafed banana plants.

DiPaulo says the plants bring a carefree, beach atmosphere to the restaurant. He credits Michael Dellis, owner of Michael's, with planting the Timonium trend. Dellis says he got the idea after spending time in Florida and Ocean City.

"I thought I was seeing things," Dellis says of spotting palm trees for the first time years ago at a restaurant on the beach in Ocean City.

So when Dellis completed an addition to the restaurant he and his family have owned for 14 years, he knew he had to have palms.

"It's comforting to be around those kinds of trees," he says. "It's the best thing we've done."

This spring, Dellis ordered an instant grove -- more than 45 palms -- from a grower in Florida. He offered leftover trees to DiPaulo and a nearby tanning salon.

"We think it's cool," says Pete Morenings, manager of Fantasy Tan. "We've had a great reaction to it. We'll add more next year."

Although some palms survive winter, Maryland's weather usually does not get hot enough to revive them to their tropical greenness until late in the summer. So most will be pulled out of the ground, to be replaced next spring.

As the palms here shrivel into eyesores, most local proprietors say they will move smaller tropical plants indoors or dig up the larger, dying palms.

DiPaulo of Turf Inn -- which he promotes as "your oasis in Timonium" -- already is wondering if he can part with the plants to which he's become accustomed.

"I guess you just pull them out," he says. "I don't know if I can do that."

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