In the landscape, palms are a sure symbol of Florida. They provide homeowners that tropical look that many strive to achieve. With proper maintenance and care, palms can live long, healthy lives in the landscape.

It’s when they are improperly maintained that things can go wrong. Many palms are victims of over-pruning, which, in the long run, can shorten their lives. Older fronds on palms will deteriorate naturally and turn brown while new, younger leaves will emerge from the top.

In order to live and function properly, palms will keep a set number of green fronds. As this cycle persists, an accumulation of dead fronds may develop on the palm. These fronds are not harmful to the health of the tree. However, for aesthetic and safety reasons, they should be removed with regular pruning.

When pruning, it is ideal that no green fronds are removed. They are needed for the health of the tree. Palms can become severely stressed when too many green fronds are removed at one time. If they must be removed, refrain from pruning fronds that are growing horizontally or upward on the palm. Prune the lower fronds, while always maintaining an "umbrella" shape with the remaining fronds.

Also, be careful of the trunk of the palm while pruning. Palm trunks are different from hardwood trees because they do not produce a protective bark on the outside. The entire trunk of the palm is alive and can be easily damaged. Fronds should be pruned close to the base without damaging the trunk. Developing flowers and fruit clusters can also be removed to reduce debris that may fall from the tree.

Over-pruning palms, known as "hurricane pruning," should be avoided. Pruning above the "umbrella" shape produces a condition on the palms called "pencil top." This consists of a narrowed trunk just below the fronds, which weakens the palm, and makes the tree hazardous. It may kill the tree prematurely.

Palms may be over-pruned due to an excessive number of yellowing fronds on the palm. If yellowing fronds are abundant, one must determine the cause of the yellowing fronds before pruning them from the tree. Yellowing fronds are most likely a sign of a severe nutrient problem. There is no research that supports the notion that removing green fronds will reduce future pruning requirements.

However, research does show that properly pruning a palm tree will keep the tree healthier, attract fewer pests, prevent a hazard in the landscape and help the tree live longer. For more information on palms or other gardening information, contact Osceola County master gardeners at 321-697-3000. They are available to take calls from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Horticulture classes are provided by the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Osceola County extension office. Classes are free. Registration is required. Upcoming programs are Why Landscapes Fail, at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, May 25, and Home Citrus Care, at 6:30 pm, Tuesday, June 1. Classes are in the Extension Services Building at Osceola Heritage Park. For details, call 321-697-3000.

Jennifer Welshans  
Horticulture Agent  
Osceola County Extension Service  
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane  
Kissimmee, FL 34744