HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

PRUNING PALMS

Found in many Florida landscapes, palms are a symbol of our subtropical climate. They provide homeowners the tropical look that many strive to achieve. Palms are great plants and with proper maintenance and care, palms can live long, healthy lives in the landscape. It's when they are improperly maintained when things can go wrong. Many palms are victims of over-pruning, which, in the long run, can shorten their lives.

In order to live and function properly, palms need to keep a set number of green fronds. Naturally, the older fronds on palms will deteriorate and turn brown while new, younger leaves emerge from the top. As this cycle persists, an accumulation of dead fronds may collect on the palm. These fronds are not harmful to the palm. However, for aesthetics and safety reasons, they should be removed with regular pruning.

When pruning palms, it is ideal that no green fronds are removed. These fronds are needed for the health of the palm. 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 only the lower fronds, while always maintaining an "umbrella" shape with the remaining fronds.

Care should be taken not to harm the trunk of the palm while pruning. Palm trunks are different from hardwood trees in that they do not produce a protective bark on the outside. The entire trunk of the palm is alive and can be damaged very easily. 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 potentially fall from the palm.

"Hurricane pruning", is a commonly used maintenance practice, but is not recommended. This severe pruning practice involves removing too many of the palm fronds, creating a "V" shaped crown. Pruning above the recommended "umbrella" shape produces a condition on the palms called "pencil top". This consists of a narrowed, weakened, trunk just below the fronds, which create a hazardous palm in the landscape. Over-pruning may also cause premature death of the palm.

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 palm. Yellowing fronds are most likely a sign of a severe nutrient problem. Palms require a special fertilizer with a balance of macro and micronutrients. Using the wrong fertilizer or none at all may cause the fronds to become deficient. Pruning the yellowing fronds off of nutrient deficient palms will not cure the overall problem of the palm. The palm will continue to have nutrient problems and yellowing fronds until a sufficient fertilizer is applied.

Palms may also be over-pruned due to labor issues. Pruning palms can be very labor intensive. Some may believe that by pruning more fronds from the palm, that it will reduce the number of times the palms have to pruned. There is no research that supports this notion of over-pruning palms, removing green fronds from the palm, will reduce future pruning requirements. However, there is research that shows that by properly pruning a palm, it will be healthier, attract less pests, not become a hazard in the landscape, and live a longer life.

Keep your palms healthy and looking good. To avoid problems associated with over-pruning, remove only dead leaves, and do not remove fronds that are above the horizontal line of the "umbrella" shape. Over-pruned palms look terrible and eliminate the reason why palms are in the landscape - for the tropical look. Why remove green fronds from the palm when the palm was planted for the tropical look? The tropical look is a result of the green fronds on the palm.

For more information on palms or other gardening information, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday-Friday from 10am to 2pm.
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