

Pruning Palms

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In the landscape, palms are a sure symbol of Florida. They provide homeowners that tropical look that many strive to achieve. They 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.

Naturally, the older fronds on palms will deteriorate 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 occur on the palm. These fronds are not harmful to the health of the tree. 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 good 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 in the fact 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 fall from the tree.

Over-pruning palms, known as "Hurricane pruning", is a pruning practice that should never be used. 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, creating a hazardous tree in the landscape. It may also cause premature death of the tree.

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. 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 tree. The palm will continue to have nutrient problems and yellowing fronds until a sufficient fertilizer is applied.

High nitrogen lawn fertilizers may actually cause nutrient deficiencies in palms. A palm special fertilizer with 100% slow release nutrients should be used on any landscape containing a palm

tree. Palms with severe nutrient deficiencies may take 2-3 years to fully recover after a proper fertilization schedule has been put in place.

Palms may also be over-pruned due to labor issues. Pruning palms can be very labor intensive, and some may believe that by pruning more fronds from the tree, that it will reduce the number of times the palms have to be pruned. There is no research that supports the notion that over-pruning palms, removing green fronds from the tree, will reduce future pruning requirements. However, there is research that shows that by properly pruning a palm tree, the tree 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, especially fertilizing palms, or for answers to other gardening and landscaping questions, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners at (321) 697-3000. They are available to take your calls Monday-Friday from 9am to 3pm. You may also stop by the Plant Clinic located at the Extension Services building in Osceola Heritage Park.