

Pruning Palms

Sally Scalera

Help! Yes, we could really use everyone's help on getting this message out. It is still evident to me as I drive around the county that the massacre of sabal palms (Sabal palmetto) is still going on. You can easily identify an over-pruned sabal palm from long distance because the head of the palm should be round and yet you will see a lot of palms with only two or three fronds up top. They end up having the look of a pineapple top!

The tragic truth is that this practice of removing green fronds is now being carried out on all types of palms. When a green frond is removed from a palm it will not be able to produce carbohydrates for the palm. Remove a bunch of green fronds and that is a lot of potential "food" you are taking away from the plant. That is not helpful to the palm and if done repeatedly over a long period of time, could potentially harm it!

Here are some of the reasons not to remove any green fronds from a palm!

- * The removal of healthy, green fronds, is not recommended because those are the leaves that carry on photosynthesis that produces the carbohydrates that the palms use to grow and protect themselves from insects and disease.
- * Palms don't naturally shed green fronds. They know they need them for their survival. When sabal palms are left untouched, their crown naturally attains a round silhouette.
- * The over-trimming and reduction in food manufacturing efficiency of a palm can also result in a reduction of the width of the palm's trunk. Palms normally grow by first thickening their trunk and then elongating it. If a lot of green fronds are removed when the crown diameter is trying to increase then it will stop due to a lack of resources (i.e. food that produces the energy used for growth.) Other events such as a drought can also cause a constriction of the trunk.
- * If a palm is deficient in nutrients like potassium or magnesium, the trimming of older, green leaves will "push" the deficiency conditions further up the canopy. These nutrients are mobile and if there is a deficiency then the new growth receives these nutrients from the older growth. That's why a magnesium and potassium deficiency shows up as yellowing of the older fronds.
- * There is also some evidence that over-trimming can make the sabal palm more susceptible to cold damage.
- * A "hurricane cut" is a practice that is done when a sabal palm is being transplanted to a site with NO irrigation. All of the fronds are removed prior to transplanting. Research has shown that the sabal will establish faster if all of the fronds are removed. This should not be done as a regular maintenance practice on any palm!
- * Unpruned sabal or cabbage palms (Sabal palmetto) are a favorite spot for our native INSECT EATING bats to roost. Their favorite insects are mosquitoes!

* Wouldn't you rather save your money and have only the seed pods and brown fronds removed on palms such as the Queen palms, Phoenix palms, etc.. Sabal palms are actually self pruning since they easily shed their dead fronds in windy storms. Another palm to save your money on is the Washingtonia palm which also has the common name of petticoat palm. These palms naturally will hold their dead fronds down by their trunk and as they get older they end up having large "petticoats" of dead fronds. Eventually, Washingtonias grow too tall to trim.

Now, for how all of you can help us get this information out, if everyone who reads this article would tell at least two other people then maybe, we will see less over-trimming of palms. Or better yet, if you see any place where the palms are over-pruned then give them a copy of this article!