

Improper Pruning Hurts Palm Trees

Beginning in July all over the Valley, palm trees are trimmed - some properly, but mostly improperly. Whether you like the look of palms in the desert or you just tolerate them, they are a welcome sign of milder climes for anyone from the great North. What I really don't like is the improper pruning practices that not only make these trees unattractive but unhealthy.

Did you know that by over pruning a palm and creating the tapered "paintbrush" look, you are exposing the core or tender crown to the elements and such harmful insects as the giant palm borer? This palm borer will invade newly exposed tissue and tunnel down into the palm's trunk, eventually killing the tree. A palm that is drought-stressed is also more susceptible to invasion.

To properly prune a palm, one should remove only the season's seed crop and dead fronds. These trees need all their healthy foliage for support and protection.

I prefer a natural look. My rule of thumb is never to remove any foliage above the horizon line, creating a "dome of foliage." Also, I like to see as much green foliage as possible - especially during the summer. Many unscrupulous local tree trimmers cut all the leaves off to get just the seeds.

So, don't let a trimmer near your palm if seeds haven't set and make it clear he or she is not to cut live fronds.



Also, do not allow maintenance workers to use climbing spikes that do severe damage to the exterior bark and create entry points for pests. This is paramount - especially if your palms have been skinned.

As for palm varieties, there is one in particular I don't recommend in the Valley: the queen palm. Most queen palms here suffer from "frizzle top," a common condition caused by the manganese deficiency in our alkaline soil. Most queen palms are usually in a state of decline and look really sad.

I would suggest planting other varieties - such as the Pindo palm, Australian fan palm, Mexican sabal palm, Guadalupe palm, Mexican blue palm, Bismarck palm, Cliff date palm, or Senegal date palm, to name a few. All of these would do much better with our soil conditions.

By **Brian Kissinger, Director of Horticulture at the Desert Botanical Garden**

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- Prune only dead leaves or those that are more than half-dead, which is indicated by a leaf that is deeply yellowed or brown.
- Prune when it's hot. Palms are warm-weather growers and recover from a large energy drain or heal minor wounds best when they are growing
- Make sure your contractor cleans all of his pruning tools often – after each cut would be ideal. If he refuses to do this, get someone else – there are plenty of people looking for work.

*Glenna Phillips – Master Gardener
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