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BETTER LIVING

IN HERNANDO

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Hernando County Extension Service

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Horticulture with Extension Agent Jim Moll

Death by pruning?

Are we killing our palm trees with overgrooming?

The answer may in fact be yes!

Palm leaves are important for two reasons. First the leaves make food for the plant by a process called photosynthesis. Second they are a nutrient resource for the newest foliage when the plant does not have adequate nutrition in the soil. If you remove too much foliage the plant will slowly starve to death.

Often times we see palms that are given a “hurricane pruning” in order to protect the plant in the event of a hurricane. The “hurricane cut” may actually reduce the protection for the palm. The fronds help add protection to the palm, much like thick walls protect you better than thin walls or no walls around you at all.

Another common problem is the total removal of any discolored leaves until only a few green leaves remain. Many of the palms in the county have some brown tipped fronds and often the yellowing of the leaves with the midrib of the frond remaining green. This is a symptom of nutrient deficiencies especially potassium and/or magnesium. Totally removing these nutrient deficient leaves speeds up more nutrient deficiencies in the palm. Why? The answer is the palm is moving potassium and magnesium

out of the lower (and thus oldest) leaves and sending them into the newest leaves in an effort to “recycle” those vital nutrients. When you see the lower leaves begin to have brown tips and yellowing and you remove these leaves you cause even greater nutritional deficiencies because the plant has not had time to transport the nutrients to the newer leaves.

What about giving the palm extra fertilizer to help feed it? Fertilizer is not plant food and can not be a substitute for palm leaves. Fertilizer does provide plant nutrients (similar to vitamins and minerals for us) but only the sugars produced by photosynthesis in the leaves is truly food for the plant. Think of it this way. If you are only given a vitamin tablet but no food you too would eventually starve to death. Only the leaves of the plant produce food.

Never remove more than a third of the palm foliage at any one time. A better way to remember how much foliage should remain on the palm? Picture a clock. The leaves of the palms should be from 9:00 to 3:00. Removing any more than that is simply too much and stress the palm. Stressed palms may come under attack from palm weevils. Palm weevils eat the heart of the palm. Once the heart is damaged the injury is fatal to the plant. The best way to avoid palm weevils is to not over-stress the palm, especially from over grooming.

On Saturday July 23, at 10:00 a.m. Urban Horticulture Extension Agent, Jim Moll will speak at the Extension Office in Brooksville on “Palms for Hernando County” During the presentation, issues such as cold hardiness, fertility requirements and insect problems of palms will be presented in great detail.

Timely topics in horticulture

Jim Moll Urban Horticulture Agent will present especially timely topics every other Tuesday, at the Forest Oaks Government Center located at 7479 Forest Oaks Boulevard in Spring Hill. Each talk will begin at 10:00 a.m. with a question and answer session to follow.