



In the Face of a Hurricane, What About Your Palms?

by Jim Watson, Friends of the Mounts Botanical Garden Volunteer

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A little late you might say, yeah, but next season will be here before you know it. Is it necessary to prune out some functional fronds of palms to prepare for strong winds? Let's get into this issue and see what we can come up with. In moving here from Oregon it didn't take long to realize that palms were the signature trees of this area. No doubt they are special and fill some specialized niches, from the stately *Washingtonia robusta* to the full *Phoenix canariensis*, they really define this area.

Palm trees have been around for a long time. They have adapted to the conditions that this area has to offer. Strong winds are one of those conditions. The trunk and stems have some amazing qualities: they are strong yet flexible. It is strong enough to support the plant, yet can be almost doubled over in severe winds. The frilly fronds not only give a tropical look but let much of the wind pass right on through. After thousands of years of existence palm trees have adapted to tropical conditions. But let's get some other opinions on the topic.

Landscaping companies that do this explain it in terms of force. They say that by removing fronds more wind passes through the tree. This makes the tree less likely to topple over in a hurricane. Sounds like physics. Wonder who has the contract for the Caribbean Islands?

The author of *Betrock's Guide to Landscape Palms*, Alan Meerow PhD. Also has an opinion on the subject. He says that only dead or near-dead fronds should be removed from a palm. Overtrimming reduces food production and can result in sub-optimum caliper development in the crown of the palm. These conditions are multiplied by each season when the pruning is done.

Palm Beach County Extension Service also has a say. They say coconuts and seedpods, which can become flying projectiles in high winds, should be removed. Fronds that have at least 1/3 of green should be left on the tree, this is important for food production. By removing producing fronds you risk a condition known as "pencil pointing." This is a narrowing of the trunk near the canopy.

As you can see there are different views on this topic. Some people want to treat the palm as an object from a physics lab, fattening the wallet of some. Others treat it as a biological wonder, bringing joy and contentment. There is a reason the palm is used, by pruning them to look like a rooster tail defeats this purpose.

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