

Are We Starving Our Palm Trees?

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Yes we are. But it's not due to lack of nutrients.

It is because of the way many people are trimming palms. The now-popular "hurricane cut" removes all but the very top growth. This results in the palms looking like carrot tops. People who perform this maintenance practice believe they are saving time and money by having their palms trimmed only once a year, rather than on an "as-needed" basis. In the long run these people will be spending more money once the palms decline and need fertilizer, fungicide and/or insecticide applications in an effort to help them survive. Palm removal and replacement is also very costly.

Why is the "hurricane cut" harmful to palms?

Basic biology tells us that the leaves of plants manufacture food for the plant and the resulting glucose is either transported to other parts of the plant or stored in the trunks. So, when we remove most of the green fronds from the palm, we are essentially removing the food factories. It would be similar to people being put on a starvation diet.



Something else happens when we remove all but the top few palm fronds. When the new leaf bud emerges from the top of the trunk, it needs to develop further and usually the outer fronds are used to support it as it grows more rigid. The lack of strong supporting fronds on a "hurricane cut" palm doesn't provide enough rigid support of the bud and it can fall over and die. Remember, also, that diseases and insects such as the palm weevil can infect and eventually kill stressed palms. The death of the bud leads to death of the palm tree itself.

Evidence of the results of hurricane cutting can be seen in the accompanying photo of Queen palms. Plant food manufactured by the palm is stored in the trunks. You will notice in the photo that there is a definite difference in diameter at the top of the trunks. The last few years of trunk growth were lean, probably due to lack of food to store. Proper nutrition and trimming could have alleviated the stress on these trees. Remember, prevention is always the best remedy.



So what is the proper way to prune palms?

Palms should be trimmed to remove brown and yellow leaves, plus any infected by diseases or insects such as palm leaf skeletonizer, to keep them from invading other areas of the plant. Plants such as the Canary Island Date Palm that tend to get yellowing along the leaf margins should be trimmed so that all leaves that are parallel to the ground and higher are retained. As new fronds form and mature, removal of the older fronds can progress using the same guidelines.

The best way to maintain palms as well as other plants involves careful consideration and planning, starting with putting the right plant in the right place. This practice helps us avoid the need to improperly prune plants by giving them room to grow naturally. Along with proper cultural practices such as periodic scouting for problems, watering and fertilizing we can grow healthy palms.

Be sure to catch one of the showings the first week in May of the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods video titled Reclaiming Paradise. This is the first time this program has been broadcast in the bay area. Tune in and learn how your landscape practices affect the Tampa Bay environment. Please consult page three for channel and broadcast times.