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With fronds like us, palms need no enemies

Aug. 7, 2004 12:00 AM

It's summer, and palm-pruning hysteria has overtaken the Valley anew. Throughout the neighborhoods chain saws ring and great piles of leaves gather at the foot of these trees. I am baffled and frequently distressed by the need to reduce such beautiful trees to pathetic ruins.

Where is the joy in taking a full, supple crown of leaves gracefully arching over the palm trunk and reducing it to a molting feather duster? If you hate the plant that much, cut it down, for goodness' sake.

I could rant forever on the brutality of palm pruning, but let me summarize: Palm owners are spending a lot of money on a practice that is unnecessary and unhealthy. There is vast misunderstanding about many aspects of pruning, no less for palms, but let's see if we can make a better job of it. Let's begin with how palms work.

Palms, like agaves, yuccas, grasses and bulbs, are monocotyledons, or monocots. Monocots send up one cotyledon - that little leaf that erupts right after germination - and have a linear vascular system that is bundled together like a column of sticks. What we call stems, or trunks, are actually a collection of leaf bases and these vascular bundles. This is why palm "wood" looks like a sponge, rather than a plank. Palms have one growing point at the base of the crown. If the growing point is destroyed, the plant dies.

Palms do not shed their leaves annually. Leaves live for many years before they fade and die. Such long-lived leaves force the plant to establish a balance between the number of leaves needed to provide energy for the plant and the amount of energy it takes to maintain them and grow new ones. Older leaves have greater photosynthetic activity and transfer more energy to the bud, allowing the formation of more and healthier new leaves.

This energy transfer is critical to the health of the palm. The removal of too many living leaves causes an imbalance in the plant that may shorten its life and make it more susceptible to insect damage and disease.

Older leaves also protect tender, new leaves from wind damage. In addition, wounds caused by climbing or errant sawing create opportunities for disease entry that are magnified when tools are not properly cleaned.

If you think your palms need to be pruned, consider these guidelines for a healthy and good-looking plant before you, or your chosen henchman, start:

- Prune only dead leaves or those that are more than half-dead, which is indicated by a leaf that is deeply yellowed or brown. Flowering stalks are an exception. They can be cut off anytime with no detriment to the plant.

- Consider how to prune the leaf. In fan palms, after about 15 feet the plant is self-cleaning, losing leaves in high winds or storms. Therefore, you may remove dead leaves up to that point, leaving the rest to fall when they are ready. These palms usually can be pruned close to the trunk, as long as it is not punctured. The leaves of date palms, sabals and others cling tenaciously to the trunk. Prune such palms by leaving a section of the petiole, or boot, attached. These stubs create interesting patterns on the trunk and are often the most ornamental aspect of the plant. Never rip or tear a palm leaf off the plant; cut it cleanly.

- Remember that pruning is a practice based on need, not on a schedule. Most palms do not need to be pruned every year. Every five years would be a better rule.

- Prune when it is hot. Palms are warm-weather growers and recover from a large energy drain or heal minor wounds best when they are growing.

- Clean all pruning tools often, ideally after each cut but absolutely when moving from plant to plant.

- If the contractor you hire does not, or refuses to, follow these guidelines, get someone else. There are plenty of capable maintenance workers out there.

I am an admirer of palms and enjoy their grace and drama, as well as the intoxicating richness they bring to a desert garden. Palms are a significant part of the identity and look of the Valley.

Yet we risk their health, and certainly their flair and style, by such cavalier treatment. No other palm-growing region attacks its palms with such vigor, and it is never too late to repent and do better by our palms.

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