

Silence of the Palms - A Story of a Slow Death*

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OVER
PRUNING
REDUCES
FOLAGE AT
TOP AND
NARROWS
TRUNK SIZE
RESULTING
IN UNSTABLE
TRIANGULAR

TRUNK RATHER THAN UNIFORM COLUMN SHAPE. TREE SPURS DAMAGE THE BARK ALLOWING FOR TERMITE INFESTATION. ARTICLE BY CHUCK MALLOY, PHOTO CREDITS: C. MALLOY, T. LASSEN

“Help! Tree trimmers are amputating my live body parts. They’re sticking tree spurs into my bark allowing pathogens and insects to infiltrate my trunk, slowly killing me. I am the palm tree. I thought you wanted me here to be your icon in the Rio Grande Valley on the Tropical Trail. Instead you’re allowing – even encouraging – my slow death.”

Too many palms in the Rio Grande Valley are being killed by improper pruning. The Palm Society of South Texas and Native Plant Center urge palm tree owners, municipalities and businesses to prune palms correctly to reduce the impact improper trimming has on palms or risk the continued loss of these plants that symbolize our region. The cost and heavy equipment involved in removing a dead fully grown tree and then installing another fully grown one to replace it should be enough reason. The Master Gardeners and Cameron County AgriLife Extension Office offer these Texas A&M and AgriLife palm pruning guidelines:

- A reputable, consciousness tree trimmer, who is licensed, bonded and insured will use only a ladder or cherry picker and not tree spurs.
- It’s important to properly sterilize, disinfect and clean all pruning tools with alcohol.
- Prune early Spring and late Fall. Twice a year, and not in the heat of summer, is plenty.
- Pruning the crown and frond bases exposes the bark to sun damage. This applies to all palms except Cuban Royals, which self-clean their frond bases.

Other things to know:

- Plants need to conduct photosynthesis to create food, strengthen their immune system and grow. When you cut live, green fronds off a palm, photosynthesis is reduced and the palm can become stressed. During drought or disease pandemics, improperly pruned palms are at risk of

an untimely death. Photosynthesis is the only way the palm receives true plant food. Fertilizers are actually supplements and not true food.

- Palm tree bark provides protection to the palm. Tree spurs that pierce the bark allow infectious diseases and insects to break in and attack the immune system.

A palm, just like any other tree, has its own natural shape. For the palm, a full crown, sweeping up, out, and down, complementing the shape, and tying it back to its trunk, is perfect as nature intended. The dead fronds hanging down around the palm's trunk are called a skirt or beard. When fronds are trimmed away from the trunk the remaining part sticking out is called the frond base. The bases provide protection to the trunk and should not be removed until they can be removed by hand or light tools. Never skin the whole trunk to the top as the new bark will be damaged by the sun. The bases should be removed little by little over the life of the palm until very mature. This way you offer more protection for a longer time.

Cutting off the green fronds does more harm than good. You may hear that it stimulates growth, or that the fronds will fall anyway, but the palm still draws energy and nutrients from that frond. Over-pruning also narrows the trunk's diameter into an hour glass shape and weakens the trunk's structural integrity making it susceptible to breakage during high winds. In fact, fire, frost, and defoliation by humans are the main stressors of palm trees. In addition, a good heavy foliage helps protect the tree in a wind storm. When there's just a spit of two or three fronds sticking up at the top, the heart of the palm is in danger of snapping off in a hard wind. Once that is gone, the tree cannot regrow it.

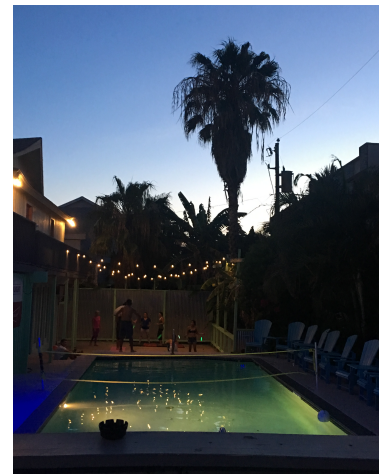
Another thing to consider when pruning is our south Texas bird migration. Proper pruning of the dead fronds prior to spring migration allows nesting areas for many permanent resident birds and migrant birds that come back up to the Valley to nest. For proper pruning, remove only completely dead, dry, brown fronds. Never remove green fronds unless severely damaged, and never prune palms for cosmetic purposes. This is why:

- Nutrients are still being obtained by the tree from the dying frond.
- The skirt made by the dying fronds complements the signature shape of the crown.
- The skirt protects the trunk from sun damage. The length of the skirt, mini or maxi, is a matter of individual taste.

Proper pruning as shown in the adjacent photo that leaves a full crown can have other benefits. If several palms are in a hammock arrangement they provide shade and a habitat for animals. My palm skirts house a Mexican yellow bat, screech owls, great horned owls and hooded orioles in the green palmate portions. Beneficial insects and other critters use the skirting for nesting and hunting for food.

Fully crowned palms at different heights also protect your property from wind during tropical storms. Remember, fire, frost and defoliation by man are the major threats to the palm. Defoliation by man is the only one that can be eliminated.

For more information, contact Cameron County Master Gardeners 956.361.8236, the Palm Society of South Texas at palmsofouthtexas@yahoo.com, or the Native Plant Center.



*Originally published in Valley Morning Star Jun 11 & 18, 2017. Chuck Malloy has some 80 palms on his property representing 15 species. The content of this article is the result of his study, research, and experience.