

Severe Pruning of Palms is not Eco-friendly

A common practice in the landscape maintenance industry is to prune palm trees yearly -- removing all but the top tier of leaves. This is often called hurricane pruning because it is sold to customers as a way to protect palms from high winds.

In reality, palms need no protection from high winds. Their flexible leaves and low wind resistance make them nearly storm-proof. Instead of protecting the palm from high winds, the practice actually weakens the canopy. The reason for this is that all fronds (leaves) in the head of a palm act together, with each frond layer supporting and adding strength to the one above. They all protect the bud and newly emerging spear leaf.

Palms manufacture food in their leaves. But palms are not as efficient as other types of trees at storing food. So palms are more dependent on their leaves to provide food for growth. With relatively few leaves, compared to other trees, removing even one green frond can significantly reduce a palm's ability to feed itself.

Some palms carry no more than 30 fronds at one time. Typically, as many as 20 fronds are removed in hurricane pruning. That means the palm's ability to manufacture food has been reduced by two-thirds. Try to imagine if you had to survive on two-thirds less calories a day! If severe pruning is done on an annual basis, the palm's trunk can gradually decrease in diameter and becomes weak, making it more likely to break in a storm.

Palms also move nutrients from the older fronds to the new growth. When all of these older fronds are removed, so is the source of much of the nutrients that palms need. As a result, nutrient deficiencies can develop, which often take years to correct.

Ideally, only dead (completely brown) fronds should be removed when pruning a palm says University of Florida palm expert Dr. Tim Broschat. Under no circumstances should palms be severely pruned! Severe pruning is characterized by the removal of any fronds above the horizontal (i.e., between the 9 o'clock and 3 o'clock positions).

Also, in the case of the Sabal palm (our state tree) care should be taken not to prematurely remove flower and fruit stalks, as the fruit of this native palm provides food for a number of bird species, including mockingbirds, woodpeckers, and robins.