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Pruning Palms

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Unlike many woody broad-leaved trees and conifers, which often need regular pruning to maintain esthetic quality, overall structure, and flower and fruit production, palms require little or no pruning to achieve and maintain optimal growth and presentation in the landscape. Pruning broad-leaved trees and conifers involves removal of growing points, such as shoot tips, buds, and sometimes even whole branches. In contrast, pruning palms is mostly relegated to removal of individual whole leaves or flowerstalks. Rarely does pruning a palm involve removal of a growing point, and only then is it used to remove stems or basal suckers from species with multiple or clustered stems. Indeed, removal of the growing point of a palm stem will usually kill that stem.

Palms are normally pruned to: 1) remove unwanted leaves; 2) remove unwanted flower- and fruitstalks; 3) remove unwanted stems of multiple-stemmed species; and 4) reduce leaf area during transplanting.

Leaf Removal

Palm leaves are normally removed once they have completed their natural life span and are functioning at a much reduced level or are dead. Such leaves are older and in the lower part of the crown, have changed from a normal green color to yellow or brown, and often persist on the stem, lending an unsightly and untidy appearance to the palm. Leaves might also be removed if they are heavily diseased or insect infested or are simply blocking the view of an important or attractive feature of the trunk or plant. Leaves and leaf bases killed by frost can be removed since they might trap moisture and promote rot of the apical growing bud, slowing recovery or even leading to death of the plant.

Some palms, such as king palms (*Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*), areca palms (*Dypsis lutescens*), and royal palms (*Roystonea* spp.), are considered self-cleaning since their old, dead leaves usually fall away cleanly and neatly on their own. However, other palms, such as the California and Mexican fan palms (*Washingtonia*), are well known and often highly prized for their conspicuous, handsome "skirt" of old, persistent leaves.

Remove unwanted leaves neatly and cleanly with a sharp saw or clippers as close to the stem as possible taking care not to damage the stem. Avoid tearing off leaves or leaf bases since this practice might damage the stem, leaving unsightly permanent scars or wounds where insects and diseases can enter. It might be necessary to undercut the base of the petiole of large leaves prior to making the top cut to prevent tearing of the remaining leaf base or trunk. Normally, remove only dead or dying leaves; avoid removing healthy green leaves. Remove diseased leaves but avoid removing leaves showing nutrient deficiencies since such removal might accelerate the deficiency problem. It is a good practice to clean all pruning tools with a solution of one part household bleach to nine parts water prior to pruning each palm since potentially fatal diseases are easily spread on pruning tools.

Flower- and Fruitstalk Removal

Flower- and fruitstalks are normally removed once they have completed their natural life span and are dead. They may also be removed just after emergence and before flowers and fruits form if fallen flowers or fruits would pose a nuisance or hazard. Remove unwanted flower- and fruitstalks as described above for leaf removal.

Stem Removal

When left to grow naturally, many multiple-stemmed species, such as Mediterranean fan palm (*Chamaerops humilis*), Everglades palm (*Acoelorrhaphe wrightii*), and saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*), will form a solid, dense, impenetrable, mound-like mass of foliage lacking in any character. Selective removal of some stems will open up the clump, giving it some character

and bringing to view stems often attractively clothed with persistent leaf bases or other handsome features. Of course, one might desire a solid, dense mass for screening out noise, wind, and dust or to block an unsightly view. Do remove stems of a clump that have grown too tall, that pose a hazard, or that have died after flowering and fruiting, such as those of the clustered fishtail palm (*Caryota mitis*). Remove stems as close to the base as possible taking care not to damage remaining desired stems.

Leaf-Area Reduction for Transplanting

Although relatively little is known about digging and transplanting palms, it is standard practice to reduce leaf area by one-half to two-thirds during transplanting to reduce water loss until new roots have generated. Such leaf-area reduction is achieved by removing entire leaves from the lower part of the crown and/or cutting back or removing parts of leaves throughout the crown.