

# Pruning Palms

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Palms are a prominent part of our Florida landscapes. They often are included because they are considered low maintenance. It's important to remember that low maintenance doesn't mean *no* maintenance. One of the maintenance tasks that must be performed is pruning. Palms require regular pruning to keep them attractive and safe.

Knowing how palms grow is important in understanding how to care for them. Palms are fairly unique in their growth habits. Unlike most other plants, palms produce new leafy growth only from their apex (top). Most plants develop new growing points when they are pruned. In this way, gardeners are able to maintain their plants at a desired size. Palms do not develop new growing points and cannot be pruned to control size. Pruning the top off of a palm will ensure the demise of the plant.

## Why Prune Palms?

Removal of dead and dying fronds is an important reason to prune palms. This not only improves the appearance of the plant, but it also is important as a safety feature. Dead and dying fronds are loosely attached to some palms, and can place people and property at risk. Ideally no live or green fronds should be removed from a palm. The green leaves are the source of food (photosynthates) for plants and are the storage site of many essential nutrients. Removal of green leaves deprives the plant of these needed resources.

If live, healthy fronds must be removed – such as for safety reasons, only those which are growing downward at less than a 90-degree angle from the trunk should come off. Avoid removing those fronds which are growing horizontally or growing upward. Fronds should be removed close to the base of the petiole but care should be taken not to damage living trunk tissue. Palms do not have a true bark and are unable to seal over wounds. Wounds and trunk injury will not go away.

## Hurricane Pruning – Yes or No?

A word or two should be said about the practice of “hurricane pruning” of palms. Those words are “no” and “no.” Hurricane pruning entails the removal of most of the leaves on a palm, and on some palms, like the Canary Island Date Palm, leaving a pineapple-like shape at the base of the fronds. This practice does not prevent damage to the plant in the case of high winds. In fact, in the long run, it may promote wind damage. Repeated over-removal of leaves weakens the plant, making it more prone to mechanical damage and more susceptible to insects and disease.

## Pruning Prior to Transplanting

There is one time when most of the fronds on a palm should be removed, and that is at transplanting. Certain palms like *Sabal* and *Washingtonia* transplant best when all of their roots are removed. The Removal of roots removes the source of water

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uptake for the plant. Leaving fronds on the palm would create a problem because of continued water loss through transpiration. Removing the green fronds at transplanting reduces the loss of water from the plant, and actually allows the plant to survive.

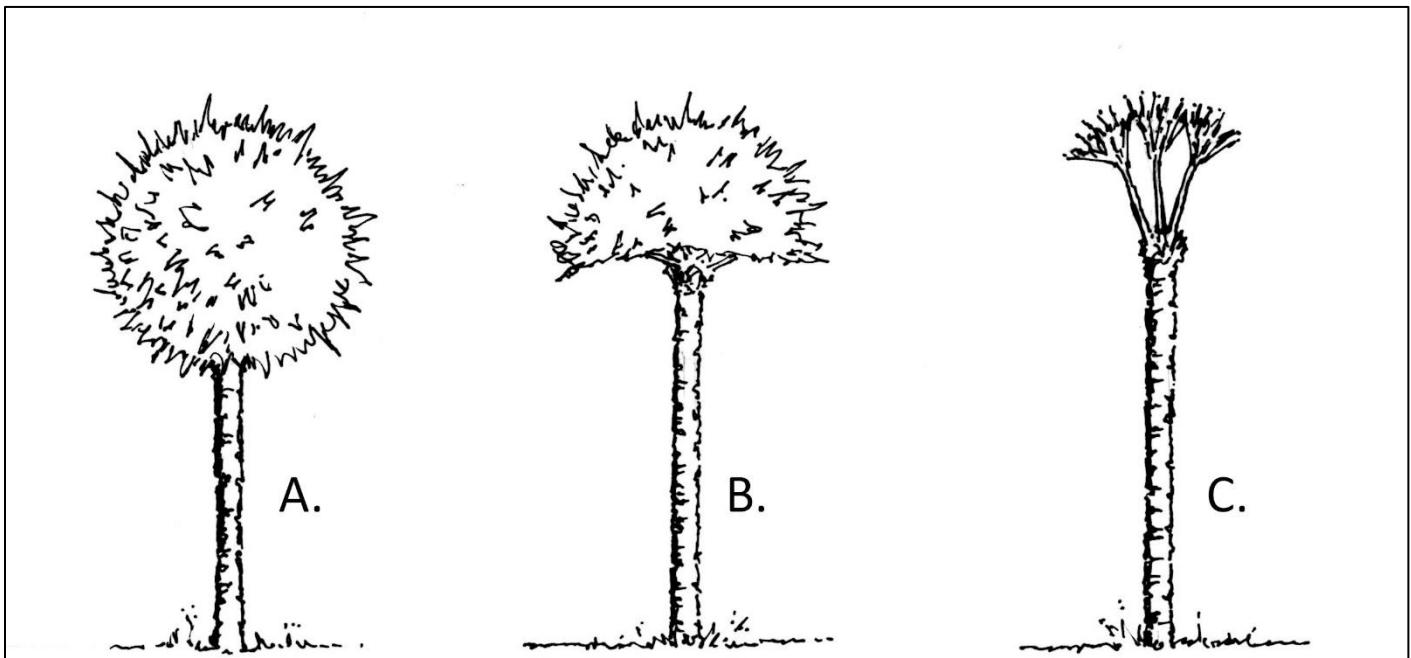
## Removal of Flower Stalks

An additional point on pruning is the removal of flower stalks and fruit clusters. Falling flower and fruit debris can be messy as well as hazardous. In addition, several palm species produce large amounts of seedlings near the base of the plant. Removing flowers or fruit reduces the number of potential seedlings.

Palms are wonderful additions to Florida landscapes, however they must be properly maintained to keep them looking their best.



Figure 1. Palm trees that have been “hurricane pruned” and are now susceptible to wind damage.



**Figure 2.** A. Best: Palm tree with all green leaves remaining intact. B. Acceptable: Palm tree pruned to maximum acceptable level – no leaves above 90 degrees removed. C. Unacceptable: Improperly pruned palm tree with leaves above 90 degrees removed.