

ARE YOU KILLING YOUR SABAL PALMS?



Florida's state tree, the Sabal Palm (also known as a cabbage palm or by its scientific name, the Sabal Palmetto), is an iconic, but vulnerable, part of Florida's landscape. Many people don't realize that **over-pruning or pruning** them in the wrong way can cause irreversible damage. In fact, the palm is self-pruning and will shed dead fronds on its own when they are ready to be released from the plant. Sometimes, however, some pruning may be desired. Being a delicate process, pruning needs to be handled by someone with the knowledge and skill required to do it correctly.

EFFECTS OF PRUNING ON SABAL PALMS

It is necessary to understand and consider the consequences of pruning palm trees. First of all, one should never prune or remove any healthy green fronds. Doing so can cause many problems to occur.

- Cutting the green fronds takes away the Palm's source of nutrients.
- Removing healthy green fronds can make the tree susceptible to disease.
- Pruning reduces the canopy size, which reduces the tree's ability to photosynthesize.
- It may permanently stunt the growth of the plant.
- Contrary to popular opinion, it will reduce the palm's natural resilience to high winds and hurricanes.
- Pruning a Sabal Palm will cause it to be **sensitive to cold**, and damage can occur during frosts or freezes.
- It removes the vital natural habitat for many migratory and native birds and animals.

Even pruning or removing a frond that is half-dead or discolored can cause significant problems. If fronds remain on the tree and do not drop, it is often a sign that the palm is not receiving enough potassium from the soil. Those unsightly fronds are providing potassium to the palm. It would be much better to treat the soil with a fertilizer than to remove the fronds.

WHAT CAN BE PRUNED AND WHEN

We've already covered the fact that green, discolored, or half-dead fronds should NOT be pruned. If a frond is fully dead, it can be removed by the proper means. Flower and fruit stalks can also be removed if done correctly, and has been found to be beneficial; it will reduce the amount of fruit dropping and subsequent seedlings that can be hard to keep up with. It may even increase leaf production.

It would be ideal if dead fronds were removed as soon as they are found; however, since they aren't very accessible, this is not very practical. Residential and commercial landscaping companies usually prune on an annual or semi-annual basis or when the customer finds the palm to be looking unsightly.

HOW TO PROPERLY PRUNE A SABAL PALM

Make sure that those who are maintaining your property know how to properly prune a Sabal Palm. If there are dead fronds or flower and fruit stalks to be pruned, it is important to have it done correctly, so no irreversible damage occurs.

- Make sure the right equipment is being used. A ladder or cherry picker will be needed. A sharp and straight-edged pruning saw should be used; a chainsaw should never be used. A chainsaw can easily cause wounds which then make the tree vulnerable to disease. The pruning saw will need to be sterilized (5 minutes in bleach should do the trick).
- Make sure climbing spikes or work boots aren't coming into contact with the palm as they will cause damage and the **potential for disease**.
- Only completely brown leaves should be cut.
- Leaves should only be cut below the 9-3 line. Meaning, if the canopy of the tree was a clock, imagine where the 9:00 and 3:00 would be, and make a mental horizontal line. Fronds should not be cut below that line.
- The frond should be cut a few inches from the trunk, so the boots (the base of the leaf) are left on the trunk.
- Leaves should never be pulled off the tree. Flower and flower stalks should also be cut a few inches away from the trunk.
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When the palm is pruned correctly, it will have a fully rounded canopy with a 9-3 line. It should not look like the top of a pineapple or feather duster. You will notice some palms with tapered or bottle-neck trunks; those palms have been pruned incorrectly.