

Palm Tree Care for the Rio Grande Valley

Palm trees are a beautiful part of our Valley landscapes. Palm trees should have a great green canopy, like a fluffy ball on top of a stick. The leaves should be bright and shiny, reflecting the sunlight. Palm trees don't die; they hang on, giving the false impression that they are arid-land plants. Like old soldiers, they just fade away. Their leaves get browner and browner and fewer new ones are produced.

Palm Trees are Summer Growers so Indulge Them in the Hot Months!

Palm trees grow vigorously from May to August if you look after them. Palm trees should get a three-foot deep soaking in a six-foot wide basin every ten or twelve days, rather than a shallow watering once a week.

Don't Mutilate Your Palm Trees!

Palm trees receive too much attention from hard-working, unskilled workers who want to cut out a lot of leaves and remove last year's leaf bases. The palm tree doesn't benefit from either of these practices.

Dead brown leaves hanging from a palm tree may be unsightly-although many of us believe they add to the beauty of a palm - but they don't hurt the tree in any way. In fact, they help shade the trunk from strong sunshine, and will provide bird-nesting sites, but they can be a fire hazard and sometimes harbor yellowjackets. The skirt of dead fronds does not harm the tree. **If you trim a palm's skirt, don't do it in the summer**; the fierce summer sun will scorch the previously shaded trunk. In the same way, the old leaf bases clasp the trunk and give it protection. For the tree's sake, it's better to leave them.

Palm trees need to have a lot of green leaves on top. If you don't like the idea of a palm tree in a skirt, it's easy to cut the dead leaves off. But never cut leaves that are showing any sign of green. Green leaves are working for the tree, manufacturing sugars from the energy of the sun. The tree needs lots of green leaves.

Besides, a palm tree that has had its leaves removed looks like a newly shorn sheep, embarrassingly naked and uncomfortable. It doesn't look like a palm tree, but like a caricature of a shaving brush.

Unfortunately, we have too many displays in public places of overdone trimming jobs that lead us astray. We tell ourselves that professional workers must know what they are doing. It's understandable, but unfortunate.

It's the same with "skinning" a palm tree: it's often overdone in an effort to impress the customer. If you feel you must remove old leaf stalks, use a linoleum knife to make horizontal cuts into the trunk at the base of the twin stalks. Cut about a quarter-inch deep, no deeper. The broad paper-like base comes off with a slight tug. Keep cutting around the trunk, a little higher each time. As you go, you'll notice that the underlying color of the trunk becomes paler; stop when it is a light tan. You've gone too far when it turns a creamy color.

As you go higher, you're removing protection from the hot sun along with the old leaf stalks, so it's not really a job for the summer months. You can too easily expose bark to burns and blisters. This accounts for those palm trees you see in public places that have trunks of uneven thickness.

Look at your palm tree climber's boots!

Going up a palm tree is a risky thing if you do it yourself, and it costs money if you hire a professional. If you hire someone, they should go up in a hydraulic lift.

Some energetic young men climb the trunk using spiked boots to maintain a grip. Don't let them! Those spikes jab into the trunk and open it up to infection. If a trimmer must wear climbing boots, have him use those that have serrated bars instead of spikes. The bars are bad enough, but they are far less damaging to the trunk than spikes.

And make sure your tree trimmer is licensed, insured, and bonded. If he falls out of the tree, you shouldn't be held responsible.

Photo examples

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Correct palm trimming

Remove only the dead leaves none of the green one.

(Above) these Mexican fan palms have been well trimmed. They retain a fully-rounded, canopy and leaf stalks have been cut close to the trunk.

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Incorrect palm trimming

(Above) these Mexican fan palms have been severely trimmed, leaving the growing point susceptible to sunburning, disease and probable death.

Selecting Palms

Selecting the right palm for your needs will be determined by your yard size, the desired function, the desired look and, of course, your budget. Check with your local nursery professional for growth characteristics, freeze hardiness and price ranges. Palms suited to the Valley include the **Mexican fan palm, California fan palm, Queen palm** or ***Cocus plumosus*, Chinese fan palm, Mediterranean fan palm, Sago palm** (remember the Sago palm is a cycad not a true palm), and. Our native **Texas Sabal fan palm**.

Planting Palms

Palms unlike other trees respond best, especially large mature palms, if they are planted in the hot summer months. The warm soil stimulates rapid new root growth, whereas in colder soils little or no root growth occurs. The root system need not be large, and the hole need only be deep and wide enough to plant the palm at its original depth.

When planting balled and burlaped palms, leave burlap on to protect root ball. Cut back top portion of burlap after planting but before filling in top 3" with soil. Container grown palms that don't freeze can be planted even when it's cold since the root ball has not

been disturbed.

Staking of large palms for one year or more is necessary to anchor the plant until new roots stabilize the plant. If transplanting large palms, trim palm fronds to top five fronds, and those five cut back 2/3rds of the palm surface along the curve of the frond. The fronds then must be tied together upright to prevent damage during planting and be kept tied until new leaf growth occurs to prevent wind damage and drying out of the growing point.

Use ample quantities of well-rotted or composted manure. Avoid fresh undecomposed manure. Avoid applying chemical fertilizer until the palms start their new growth. Check with your local professional nurserymen if you have any questions.

(Information for this article adapted from Desert Landscaping, How to start and maintain a healthy landscape in the Southwest. George Brookbank, 1992, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, AZ..

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