PALM OVER-PRUNING: WHAT IS WITH THE 'MOHAWK' CUT ON PALMS?

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Figure 1. This is excessive pruning on a date palm. Note the 11 to 1 o'clock canopy outline.







Figure 2. These sabal palms (and 1 coconut!) were pruned too harshly. Sabal palms should be pruned so that the canopy is kept at a more normal 9 o'clock to 3 o'clock outline.

There may be some give and take. And some species may tolerate this approach better than others, but palms should not be pruned in an 11 o'clock to 1 o'clock position (hurricane cut). University of Florida researcher, Dr. Tim Broschat and others contend that green fronds should not be removed from palms (unless they are poking through your pool screen cage!).

Some negative and / or potential concerns:

- **1.** Over trimming, by removing healthy green leaves, takes away the energy manufacturing potential of the palm. This can result in "pencil pointing" a sudden reduction in trunk "thickening" at the height in the crown where diameter increase should be taking place. This weak point creates potential hazard issues as the canopy is susceptible to wind throw.
- 2. Over-pruning may contribute to reduced winter hardiness.
- 3. Continual excess pruning of cabbage palms may increase flowering, which can stress the plant.
- **4.** Removing fronds of trees that are suffering potassium and magnesium deficiencies removes a reservoir of nutrients and with potassium deficiency, may quickly lead to premature palm death.
- 5. The removal of too many fronds and the supporting base or "boot" could decrease the built-in stabilizing or shock-absorbing capacity design of the crown and make the remaining fronds and the bud more susceptible to wind damage.

As a rule of thumb, only prune brown or half-brown fronds. The outline of palm canopies, for most species, should be about a 9 o'clock to 3 o'clock position.

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Figure 3. Pencil-neck symptom from overpruning this queen palm in Glen Cove. This is now a hazard risk with the narrow and weakened trunk.