

Keep our Sabals Safe from Harsh Pruning

by Cammie Donaldson

Harsh pruning of sabal palms is the practice of removing all but a few fronds at the top, resulting in a palm that looks much like an upside-down featherduster. This type of pruning started a few years ago and has spread statewide, ostensibly as a way to cut down on the "maintenance" associated with picking up dead fronds which shed naturally. The practice is now so common that newcomers or the uninformed may think the look is preferable to the naturally full, round crown of the sabal palm. Whatever the reason for harsh pruning, it's a bad practice that needs to stop.

Palms use their green fronds to photosynthesize, just as other plants use their green leaves. Yes, harsh pruning will result in fewer fronds to pick up – because the palm's growth rate is being slowed! Cutting green fronds reduces the palm's source of nutrients, thus weakening the palm, slowing (and perhaps stunting) growth, and inviting disease. These stresses can result in bottle-necked constrictions in the trunk of a palm, causing it to break off in high winds and die.

The sabal palm (*Sabal palmetto*) is our state tree and has traditionally been a maintenance-free choice for the landscape. Over thousands of years, it has adapted to a wide variety of landscape conditions, including full sun or shade, dry or wet soils, the searing summer heat and unpredictable cold snaps. The sabal palm has been a disease- and pest-free plant, until now. Harsh pruning could be the undoing of our sabal palm's trouble-free reputation.

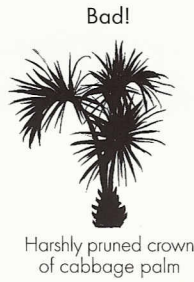
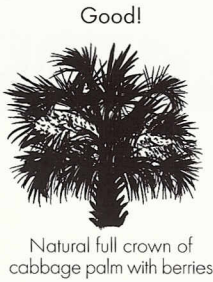
There are other important reasons not to prune fronds from the sabal palm. The naturally full, round crown of the sabal is a wonderful place for birds and other small creatures to hide and nest. Harsh pruning

typically removes those fronds which produce flowers and berries – very important sources of food for birds, butterflies, bees, raccoons, opossums, and squirrels. Cutting fronds also makes the palm's heart more susceptible to freezes.

The only time it is acceptable to prune green fronds is when a palm is being transplanted or if the fronds are a safety hazard (consider moving the palm!).

Dead (brown) fronds can be trimmed but keep in mind that these are the favorite shelter of bats, who control your mosquito population.

There is a new brochure available which you can distribute to landscapers, municipalities, and the general public (see ad below). This brochure was the brainchild of Amy Mosher, a very talented and caring member of the Sea Rocket Chapter in north Brevard County. Amy designed the brochure and had many printed and distributed at her own cost. Order some brochures and help Amy spread the word – no harsh pruning!



NEW BROCHURE AVAILABLE

Protect Florida's Vulnerable State Tree



All the facts about harsh pruning of the sabal palm. Tri-fold rack brochure, printed on recycled paper, fits in standard #10 envelope. Available in packs of 1000 for \$85, including shipping & handling.

Send check or money order for \$85 payable to Marine Resources Council, with name, phone number, and shipping address to:

Marine Resources Council
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Rockledge FL 32955
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Please allow two weeks for order to be filled.