

Q: How does one trim a palm tree?

A: Your first question should be does this palm need to be pruned at all? Palm fronds should be removed if they are dead or dying, but not if they are even 50% green. Dead fronds provide rat habitat and are a fire hazard. Some palms (*Phoenix canariensis*) leaves are very spiky, and can be hazardous to come in contact with. Those fronds may need to be pruned back from walkways or decks if planted too closely.

All palms are monocots, which means that they have only one growing point at the top of the tree. If that point is damaged by too enthusiastic pruning, the entire plant may die. Palms do not have branches with dormant buds to produce new leaves. The leaves can only emerge from that growing point when conditions are right. The fronds are needed to provide nourishment for the trunk and root system. Removing them weakens the tree. The old leaf bases are called petioles. They can be removed by pulling, but you should stop when there is a distinct color change visible on the trunk, or when oozing sap is observed.

Palms should never be climbed by people wearing spikes, as this damages the trunk and weakens it. If the palm is so tall that using a pole-pruner is not practical, an arborist with ladders or a hydraulic lift should do the pruning. Pruning equipment should be cleaned and sterilized between trees to limit the spread of disease causing organisms.

Some varieties of palms are “self-cleaning,” which means that they drop their dead fronds. This can be an asset and a problem. The fronds that fall make a mess, and can be a real problem if near driveways, streets or playgrounds. On the other hand, you do not have to pay an arborist to remove the spent fronds.

The following are basic pruning directions for palms:

- If a frond is dead or brown, prune it off. Do not prune close to the trunk. Do not remove green fronds.
- Remove loose petioles by pulling from the tree, using good gloves.
- Remove flowers and fruit.