

Palms in southern Nevada landscapes



Throughout Southern Nevada landscapes, palms are among the most ubiquitous plants. They truly are a symbol of a hot environment, although when one looks at them in places like the Middle East, they appear in oases, not the middle of the desert. More closely related to grasses than to trees, they can be graceful additions to a range of settings.

There are different varieties, many of which can flourish in this Mojave environment

as long as they receive sufficient water and nutrients. Palms are popular, but too often people treat these plants very cruelly. I once considered driving about town and starting a photo collection entitled “The Tortured Palm Series.” While I never did create that series, the temptation remains, especially when I see such a large number of palms that are not thriving as they might.

Planting is often when the problems begin. Palms are plants, and despite some opinions to the contrary, they do not need to be planted in the middle of July. They should also be planted in something other than sand. Sandy soils have good drainage (critical for most plants), but that is not the same as pure sand, which cannot provide anything like the fertility required for good establishment and growth. Water is also essential; no life can survive without it, even a life that is adapted to hot dry climates.

Once they have been put in the ground, their troubles continue. They may have spikes hammered into their trunks to attach supports. This rarely benefits any tree, much less one with the tender vascular system of a palm. Sometimes they are planted as if they were sticks that could be placed in the ground at any depth. That is incorrect. While their roots must be covered and protected, the trunk does not produce extra roots when it is buried. It may rot.

If they have survived the planting process, they will produce new green “fronds”. Each of these is a large leaf with many leaflets. Unlike true trees, palms have relatively few leaves, but each of them can be productive for many years.

The canopy of the palm frequently arrives with its fronds tied into a tight package. This is meant to protect the plant from wind, which is important while it is in transit and first placed in the ground. Fronds must not be left bound for extended periods, however. They are the plant’s source of food, and if they are bundled together much of the surface area is hidden from the sun.

They cannot produce the sugars that are the building blocks of life, and will not live for long in that bound condition.

Only dead fronds should be removed from the plant. When they are dead they have turned brown and dry. When green, they are keeping the plant growing. Pruning live fronds into a feather duster may result in an interesting shape on a weakened plant.

Several Cooperative Extension publications are available on palm growth and maintenance. They can be downloaded for no charge at <http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/>.

Dr. Angela O'Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. Contact ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu or 702-257-5581.