

# We Are Changing Direction in Palm Care

A memo from Michelle Saunders

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You may have noticed that the shape of the Sabal Palms, a dominant native tree in our landscaping, is changing from viewscapes similar to those above, to a round and fuller crown of fronds. These Palms and many of the exotic palms in our green spaces are being allowed to fill out to their natural intended shape or form. This change will provide for enhanced wildlife habitat, increased health benefits to tree, and ensures long term sustainability. According to scientific research and accepted pruning standards, all green fronds must remain on the tree to provide it with critical nutrient storage and transpiration, remediating Carbon in the environment, and protection of the tree from damaging winds. Full palm crowns provide wildlife habitat, cooling shade refuge from the intense Florida sun, and overall pleasing landscape character. Also, any pruning of the green fronds is costly both monetarily and high-risk aerial pruning safety - considering there are over 600 Sabal Palms in common areas of Victoria Park.



Full Crown Beauty of the Native Sabal Palms in Victoria Park

## **The Sabal Palm in the Common Area Landscaping**

As conditions that were specified by the Development Order for Victoria Park and corresponding natural resource agency permits issued for the development, these native trees were used in landscapes by the developers to provide a biodiversity xeric tree for low maintenance, high esthetics, and to provide a valuable wildlife habitat. They constitute a large portion of the development requirement of having at least 75% native xeric plants in the common areas. These native plants have adjusted to the extreme environmental conditions in central Florida - and their use in our landscaping is not to encumber or be burdensome with their upkeep. As native plant use in our landscaping matures over time, the maintenance demand curve should subside with only minor cleanup and light trimming, and little to no irrigation needs. As a self-shedding palm species, the only maintenance demand is to trim or pull off any dead and brown fronds that appear at their crown base and collecting any cast-off dry fronds or dead seasonal flower stalks. Pool areas and amenity centers demand a higher level of watchful cleaning of the dead basal fronds or flower stalks as they appear.

The tight packed frond morphology that is unique to this Palm Species has a history of high wind and hurricane damage resistance. The crown of full fronds prevents individual frond damage in wind conditions and it counters trunk stresses with tree stability. Uprooting or trunk lean is very rare to non-existent due to the depth and large diameter of the Palm's root system. The live green and even yellow fronds should be kept on these Palms.

The compact round crown or head of the Sabal Palm (*Sabal palmetto*) protects the terminal bud and crown shaft with the emerging young fronds. The Tree produces an average of 14 new fronds annually. In the wild habitat, it casts off dead brown fronds from the base of the crown to keep it pest free or from fungal/disease attack, and most important, reducing the threat of a high heat wildland fire. In an urban or landscape setting, these brown fronds can be pulled or cut off early before reaching the grounds. This should be the only pruning care activity needed for a clean and orderly Sabal Palm care. Adaptation of the Palm forms the round and tight green crown that not only protects the growing terminal bud, but forms a wind resistant canopy protecting each individual frond by the tight crown density of combined live fronds. The fronds are attached to the main trunk with a strong dual "plaite" or boot that does not release in high wind. Any pruning of this Palm for high wind is not needed. So-called "Hurricane Trimming" actually opens up the crown or canopy so the emerging frond protection is absent and damage occurs to the young individual fronds without neighboring or cluster frond support.

The wildlife benefit increases greatly from the full crowns providing forage and cover opportunities. Natural pollinators such as bees and butterflies, seek out these trees for their highly productive flowers. In addition, the seeds produced by the Palm are edible drupes that provide high quality forage for birds and small animals even when dry. Wildlife impact is significant from the pruning

actions. Each complete crown is essentially a compact wildlife habitat. The importance of the shade, light absorption, and cooling ability of the palm canopies cannot be overemphasized. The value of the shade producing canopy for wildlife use and understory plants providing ground habitat and cover is essential in this high heat climate of central Florida.



Wildlife photos by John Serrao

Palm trees add to the rich diversity of landscape plantings in our green space to create a unique tropical viewscape for the Victoria Park residents and visitors. This mix of mostly natural shrubs, plants, trees, and palms is the strong attraction that helped form decisions for most of us to buy and settle in this beautiful community.

The pruning/trimming specifications in the maintenance contract mirror the science and guidance established by the American National Standards Institute A300, *Standards for Tree Care Operations* ANSI; The University of Florida – IFAS Extension ENH1182 *Pruning Palms*; UF-IFAS – ENH 853 *Pruning Palms*; UF-IFAS – ENH 1094 *Palms of North Florida*



These Natural Shapes Will be Coming Soon to Our Local Common Green Areas of Victoria Park