



WHY AND HOW TO PROTECT THE CABBAGE PALM

(Author's Note: This is the forth in a series of articles by members of the City of Sanibel Vegetation Committee dealing with vegetative matters of concern to island residents. Members of the Vegetation Committee are Sanibel residents appointed by City Council for one-year terms. To be considered for appointment, contact the City Manager's Office at (239) 472-3700.)

The Cabbage palm (*Sabal palmetto*) is a stalwart native and has been described as a small ecosystem in itself. If you respect Sanibel's environmental sensibility to live in harmony with our natural surroundings, that seems reason enough to protect this important palm. Notwithstanding, it is also the Florida State tree, rugged and perfectly adapted to our, sometimes harsh, barrier island environment.

WHY DOES THIS PALM DESERVE OUR KNOWLEDGABLE CARE?

Let's explore this small ecosystem to better understand how it supports plant, bird, insect, and critter life.

- Brown fronds provide a unique habitat for tree frogs and bats which are a natural mosquito control.
- Frizz from the fronds makes great nesting material.
- Flowering branches (inflorescences) provide nectar for bees and butterflies.
- Palm berries are sources of highly nutritious food for local birds, migratory birds, and small mammals.
- The palm "boots" (leaf bases) are important habitat for other plants, including the beautiful Golden polypody fern.

Harsh pruning of these palms jeopardizes all these habitat benefits and can endanger the health, and even the life of the palm. **Its green fronds are the Cabbage palm's source of nutrients.**

- Cutting healthy green fronds stunts growth, invites disease, and reduces the palm's natural resilience to high winds.
- Pruning of protective green fronds makes the palm's cold-sensitive heart susceptible to frosts.
- An over-pruned palm ("hurricane cut") leaves the heart of the palm totally unprotected in strong winds. Damage to the heart can result in the death of the palm.
- An over-pruned palm can develop a bottleneck trunk, sometimes referred to as "penciling". In high winds and hurricanes, this stressed and weakened point can cause the palm to break off and die.
- Work boots with climbing spikes cause wounds in the trunk, leaving the palm prone to disease.

You can make a difference. Here's HOW.

- **Do Not** remove green fronds.
- Save Money!! Say **NO** to landscapers who want to over-prune, especially green fronds. Exclude annual harsh-pruning from your landscape contract. Though not necessary, it is acceptable to prune brown and yellow fronds hanging below an imaginary horizon line (think like a clock, 9 to 3).
- Say **NO** to "Hurricane Cuts". **The Cabbage palm is naturally wind resistant.**
- If you are hoping to protect your palms during hurricane season, this drastic pruning, which leaves them vulnerable, is the worst thing you could do.
- Help spread the facts. Having a better understanding of the Cabbage palm's use by our plants and wildlife, enables us to see its natural assets as things of great value, and to many, beauty. Enjoy it!

You can learn more about protecting native vegetation on Sanibel by visiting the Natural Resources Department page at www.mysanibel.com. For questions about vegetation on Sanibel or to request a site visit, contact the City of Sanibel Natural Resources Department at (239) 472-3700.



*Acceptable
Pruning

Harsh
Pruning

Long Term
Effects

*Illustration by Amy Mosher. (Sabal Palm Pruning.) Online Image.
[Protect Florida's Vulnerable State Tree](http://www.protectfloridastatetree.com). Downloaded 17 Mar.
2014. <http://home.earthlink.net/~walterx9/Env/PalmPruning.html?vm=r>.



Unpruned Cabbage Palm (Photo City of Sanibel)



Harsh pruning (Photo City of Sanibel)