



Inland News

Safety, disease endanger Inland palm trees

Fire danger, nuisance making trees unwelcome

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The Press-Enterprise

Video: [The Thousand Palms Oasis](#)

They have won over retirees, insinuated themselves into countless cities' souvenirs, inspired artists and tricked much of the world into believing Southern California's climate is tropical. But now palm trees are facing scrutiny that could change Inland skylines.

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Rodrigo Peña / The Press-Enterprise

Jim Cornett studies palm trees at the Coachella Valley Preserve in Thousand Palms. Some Inland cities are eliminating some of the trees, which Cornett says don't belong outside their native desert home.

From San Bernardino to Redlands to Los Angeles, the palms featured in postcards and city logos have raised concerns over potential fire hazards, entanglements with power lines and negative ecological effects. And with many tall palms nearing the end of their life spans, cities are deciding whether to plant new palms or replace them with other trees.

In San Bernardino, the city has banned new palm trees along windswept foothills in its fire-hazard area. The Los Angeles City Council voted to replace many of its palms with leafy native oaks and sycamores, which they say will provide more shade and oxygen.

Redlands plans to sell off some of its tall palms to nurseries and outside developers to prevent them from damaging power lines.

"Some of these trees have been here 80 or 100 years, and it just seemed contrary to the community's values to remove them," Redlands Mayor Jon Harrison said. "But there were no other options."

Still, some Inland palm enthusiasts say communities should spend more and try harder to keep them.

"We do see some issues of health and safety with the trees, but Palm Springs wouldn't be Palm Springs without our trees," said Palm Springs Mayor Ron Oden.

Palm Springs contracts with landscapers to maintain the 2,978 palm trees on city property. Those include the full-skirted and flammable desert fan palms that line Palm Canyon Drive.

The Exotic Palm

Riverside and San Bernardino counties have dozens of species of palm trees, imported from such places as the Canary Islands, Japan and Brazil.

Palm Springs biologist Jim Cornett studies California's only native palm tree, the *Washingtonia filifera*, or desert fan palm. It forms unexpected oases in the deserts of the Coachella Valley, but it does not grow naturally in more temperate parts of the Inland region.

People have planted them in yards and along avenues because the trees and their tropical cousins conjure up warm and exotic associations, Cornett said.

"By putting in palms, you kind of recreate the wonderful environment of the oasis," he said.

Cornett spent a recent day photographing the dense Thousand Palms Oasis, where the San Andreas Fault sends water to the desert's surface just north of Interstate 10 in Thousand Palms. He ambled among towering trees with their ruffled coats of dead fronds running from foot-to-crown. Birds nest in the trees' golden skirts, and the rare western yellow bat has been known to roost there.

Cornett has devoted his life to the trees since he first saw them decades ago as a schoolteacher, but he believes the palms do not belong outside of their desert home. That goes double for imported exotic palms, which he says are pretty but are not the best choice for the environment.

Cornett agrees with the Los Angeles City Council, which voted in November to avoid planting new fan palms on city property on the grounds that certain plants, many of them native, would provide more shade, drainage and oxygen.

Some native animals adapt well but others struggle with palms and exotic plants, said **Ileene Anderson, a biologist with The Center for Biological Diversity.**

The band-tailed pigeon population in the Inland region has declined with the disappearance of its oak tree habitat, and the woodpeckers here cannot find food in relatively mushy palm trunks, she said.

Still, some native trees can lift pavement with their roots and cause other pricey maintenance problems, said Leland Lai, president of the Palm Society of Southern California.

"It does break up the inner-city warehouse skyline kind of environment," Lai said of palm trees. "It is much different than looking at a regular tree."

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PALM TREES: While many see palm trees as a symbol of California, some cities say the trees create problems and risks. Here are a few palms that have spurred debate:

CANARY ISLAND DATE PALM

Phoenix canariensis
Native to: Canary Islands off the coast of north Africa
Full height: 40-70 feet
Problem: The tree is susceptible to a fatal palm disease that could threaten the Coachella Valley's date industry.
Response: The state restricts palms brought into the valley without special approval. Riverside County advises landscapers to sterilize pruning tools.



DESERT FAN PALM

Washingtonia filifera
Native to: California, Arizona and northeastern Baja California
Full height: About 60 feet
Problem: The tree naturally grows a skirt of fronds that die and are very flammable. Fire investigators say fronds helped spread the 2003 Old Fire.
Response: San Bernardino and Rancho Cucamonga have banned all palms from new developments in fire-hazard zones.



MEXICAN FAN PALM

Washingtonia robusta
Native to: Southern Baja California
Full height: About 90 feet
Problem: Los Angeles officials say the wiry trees don't provide enough shade. In Redlands, the trees can grow too close to power lines.
Response: L.A. City Council voted to replace dead palms with leafy kinds of trees. Redlands began a plan to sell off some of its palms.



SOURCES: "A FANFUL SYMBOL OF CALIFORNIA" PHOTOS BY ROBERT JOE RUFFLE AND PAUL GIBBY, THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE ARCHIVES

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Giant Matchsticks

But in San Bernardino, City Councilman Neil Derry says the trees' Hollywood, Rodeo Drive and tropical-paradise associations are passé and might be dangerous to Inland residents.

"They are just giant matchsticks as far as I am concerned," Derry said.

The Panorama Fire swept the city when he was about 12, he said. He remembers hosing down the roof of his family's house and watching smoke billow on the horizon, an experience that left him keenly aware of the city's high fire risk.

When Derry was councilman in October of 2003, the Old Fire tore across San Bernardino, destroying hundreds of houses in Derry's northern ward.

Officials and investigators later cited palm trees as a major factor in the rapid spread of the 91,000-acre fire. They said palm trees' dry, dead fronds caught fire, detached and blew long distances, setting homes and hillsides ablaze.

The city responded by banning palms in new construction along the fire-hazard zone in the foothills, but residents there can still choose to plant palms on their property. The city's Economic Development Agency now offers grants to residents to remove palm trees.

Palm trees' fire risk boils down to how well people maintain them, but any type of tree can be dangerous if it carries a lot of dead leaves, said Kevin Turner, pre-fire management division chief for the Riverside County Fire Department.

"If people were going to maintain them, it would be less of an issue," Turner said. "But how do you ensure that? Are you going to have an inspector go and check each tree?"

A Changing Landscape

In Redlands, the City Council approved a plan in December to sell off palm trees that grow too close to power lines in order to avoid maintenance problems.

The city had considered moving lines underground or routing them around the trees so trimmers would not

inadvertently kill them. But the city decided it would be too costly on most existing roadways.

Many of the city's almost 6,000 palms top 100 feet and date to the city's early days when Redlands was a collection of orange groves bounded by rows of palms.

The Public Utilities Commission requires 18 inches of clearance between foliage and power lines to guard against fire and outages, said Vince Oatis, vegetation manager for Southern California Edison.

If trimmers cut too deeply into the palm fronds, they can hit the heart and kill the tree, he said.

Southern California Edison, which has 1.1 million customers in San Bernardino and Riverside counties, handles hundreds of power interruptions each year caused by vegetation -- and about half of the culprits are palm trees, Oatis said. In many cases, large fronds fall or blow across power lines and short-circuit the system, he said.

Some workers have come to resent palms like the ones in Redlands, which appear to grow back as fast as they can be trimmed, Oatis said. It means trimmers have to regularly shimmy up as high as 100 feet, sometimes with only a harness and the trunk to support them, he said.

"A palm tree probably isn't a tree trimmer's first love, but they have their place even in the city of Redlands," Oatis said. "On a clear day when you are on the 10, and you see them with those mountains in the background, it's breathtaking."

Artistic Wonder

It is that classic view of Redlands' famous rows of fan palms that local artist Janet Edwards captures in many of her etchings.

But many of her etchings, some of them quite recent, show scenes that have since disappeared, uprooted and plowed over by bulldozers and covered with concrete.

Such development and the growing population make it more difficult for people to coexist with the trees' shortcomings, Edwards said.

"The prime time was when the palms and the vast number of orange groves were just set off by the mountains," she said. "Now the closer the palms get to homes and commercial development, the more conflicts you get with hazards and other matters."

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