

QUEEN PALM CARE

Drawn from Moon Valley Nursey and other sources

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The best way of dealing with the many issues associated with queen palms is consider never using them in your home's landscape. If your queen palm dies, you may want to consider replacing it with another variety of palm. Consider the use of California Fan Palms, Mexican Fan Palms and the various varieties of date palms and Mediterranean palms. Here's why.

The Queen Palm (*Syagrus Romanzoffianum*) is a medium sized palm that was originally brought to the U.S. from cooler, wetter Brazil. Queen Palms can be grown in many parts of the U.S. where winter temperatures don't go below 20 degrees very often. In the Western United States, Queen Palms are everyone's favorite for lush, tropical feature trees in many types of landscapes.

Queen Palms are ideally sized (15' to 20' tall) for many landscape uses. The queen palm produces some of the longest fronds, reaching 20 feet under ideal conditions. The center rib is lined with three foot long pendulous leaflets that are crimped for an interesting foliage texture. They don't grow too tall and overbearing, but they're not tall enough to be considered a dwarf palm. Queen Palms are very clean and generally easy to grow, making them the number one choice around pools, patios and courtyards. They do not have an invasive root system, so proximity to sidewalks or pool decks isn't a problem.

Here in the low desert, queen palms have always been borderline, even under standard irrigation in normal rain years. Now with extended drought and irrigation interruption, most queens went from borderline to absolute decline over this last year. The problem is that desert queen palms need the supplemental rain from monsoons which don't always come. They also have to contend with recently abnormally dry winter and absence of late summer humidity. This combination has robbed both plant and soil of every bit of residual moisture.

Where new drought tolerant landscapes replace a water demanding lawn, the queens adjacent that thrived on the turf irrigation may be forgotten when irrigation systems are modified. Once conditions change queen palms may quickly demonstrate browning of their leaves incrementally as internal moisture declines. Dieback in any plant is the way they reduce the demand for water generated by the leaves

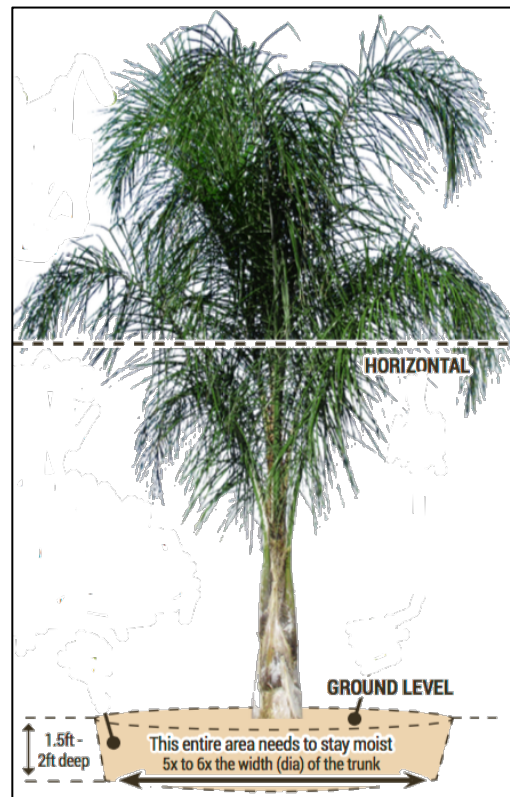
A healthy queen should have a lush head of long hair and flower annually if provided enough water. If suffering she'll brown out, drop fronds, quit flowering or over flower, and the head dies back gradually. After all fronds have died the trunk may live for a time, but there's no way to predict survival under those conditions. However, queen

palms are super-fast growing so they can come back just as fast if there's still life in the trunk.

WATERING

Queens don't originate in such dry climates so they're not geared for prolonged summer drought. Though most people consider a Queen Palm a tree, it is more closely related to grass in structure and growth characteristics. Accordingly, watering requirements and scheduling will be similar to those of grass. The biggest mistakes made in watering Queens are not watering often enough not watering wide enough.

Given that Queen Palms are similar to grass, they do not have extremely deep roots (1' to 4' Avg.) They do, to most people's surprise, have fairly wide roots (usually at least as wide as the fronds). As a Queen Palm grows, its root base gets wider. Most of the water absorption takes place at the tips of the roots. It is important to water adequately around the entire root base each time water is applied. A good rule of thumb is to water an area at the base of the tree at least five times as wide as the diameter of the trunk. (e.g. a 1-foot wide trunk should be watered at least 5 feet wide) When watering by hand or a drip system, this area should be saturated to a depth of at least 3 feet. To check saturation, you should always be able to insert a long screwdriver into your soil 2 to 3 feet away from the trunk. If you can't, water more often and wider.



Another common mistake is failing to move drip system emitters wider as the tree grows. In many cases where Queen Palms are struggling, the drip emitters are right against the trunk many years after the tree was planted! How often to water Queen Palms will vary somewhat with soil conditions, rainfall and temperature. Use the following schedule as a guide, but make adjustments, if necessary, based on the above-mentioned variables.

Pruning

Only remove fronds that hang downward (below horizontal line). Simply cut frond about 2"-3" from trunk using a cut that is parallel to the trunk. During summer months it's common to get some brown tips. It's OK to just trim off the brown and leave the green portion of the frond. Trimming is usually necessary once or twice a year.

Feeding

Queen palms enjoy fertile, well-drained soil. Much of our soil in the low desert is high pH (alkaline), high clay content, and poorly-drained. The soil also lacks organic matter and due to the high pH, many micronutrients required by queen palms are chemically tied up in the soil and unavailable to the trees.

The single most effective step in assuring queen palm health is to improve the planting site conditions, that is, soil fertility, soil drainage and irrigation practices. Regarding soil fertility, queen palms enjoy regular fertilizing. They require micronutrients such as iron, zinc, magnesium and manganese. These are available in fertilizers specially formulated for palms and other tropical plants. Feeding is recommended on three or four times per year.

Regarding drainage, plant trees in well-drained areas if possible. Drainage on established trees can sometimes be mechanically improved by augering or drilling with a 2-4 inch bit to a depth of at least 12 inches. The use of gypsum can be helpful to improve water penetration.

For established trees, you can accomplish both the above objectives by a process called vertical mulching. Once holes have been drilled around your palm, you can backfill them with a mixture of fertilizer and gypsum combined with pea gravel, sand or perlite. The filled holes aerate the soil, improve drainage, and deliver nutrients via the fertilizer. Soil sulfur can also be added to the mix to help lower pH.

Disease

Queen palms are occasionally subject to an air-borne fungus that attacks the growth bud of the palm. The resulting condition is called Palm Bud Rot or Palm Crown Rot. A queen palm's growth bud is located at the top and center of the queen palm just below where new leaves emerge. The fungus causes damage to this bud leading to the collapse of the new growth. This collapse of the top fronds is the most common symptom of fungal activity. The damage can be extensive and if the tree doesn't die, recovery is slow, requiring a season or two for the tree to replace the lost foliage. For further information about threatening these diseases search the internet.

Queen palms also suffer from micronutrient deficiencies that can mimic fungus symptoms, so you need to investigate carefully before undertaking a treatment plan and unnecessarily applying toxic and expensive fungicides. (A deficiency of manganese, for example, is responsible for a condition called Frizzle Top. Frizzle Top causes fronds to be dwarfed or deformed when they unfurl from the central growth spire at the top of the palm. You will also want to research Frizzle Top before discussing a possible treatment with your arborist.