

Untrimmed Palms Pose Fire Risk

January 18, 1999 | HARRISON SHEPPARD | SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Among the thousands of trees that dot Southern California's landscape, perhaps none symbolizes the region more than the palm tree. With their stately trunks and thick, flowery masses of fronds, they liven up the urban scenery and offer a tropical atmosphere.

But when not maintained properly, palm trees can also create a deadly fire hazard--literally exploding into flames in a matter of minutes, according to fire officials.

Two years ago, a fire started by a palm tree that snapped a power line devastated Lemon Heights, destroying 33 buildings and causing \$3.5 million in damage.

And in 1982, a palm tree sparked one of the worst blazes in Southern California history, one that leveled 53 buildings in Anaheim, leaving 1,300 people homeless and causing \$50 million in damage. That blaze was reportedly started by a wire from a city street light rubbing against an untrimmed palm tree, setting the fronds on fire and sending flames onto nearby roofs.

The city eventually paid more than \$12 million to insurance companies and property owners to settle claims from that blaze, which took more than 350 firefighters to combat.

Orange County Fire Authority Capt. Scott Brown said palms--and other trees--become a serious fire hazard when they are not well trimmed. The danger is especially great when the leaves and fronds dry out and Santa Ana winds blow.

"It's just like a torch; if it's not maintained properly, that will just ignite any adjacent structures," Brown said.

Besides palms, officials said, pine trees also pose an especially high fire risk. A pine tree's dry, dead needles can accumulate on roofs and in yards--just waiting to ignite. Eucalyptus trees are oily and can easily ignite as well, officials said.

Overgrown trees are hazardous not just when the Santa Anas blow, Brown added. If there is a lot of rain, some trees can grow top-heavy and tip over if the ground is loose and the wind is strong.

Branches from the heavier species of trees, such as ficus and eucalyptus, can also pose public safety hazards when they break off during windstorms. Palms, however, are less likely to cause serious damage in this manner because their fronds tend to be lighter, tree experts said.

Cities have varying schedules for trimming public trees. Some cities trim them every other year, while others do it only when residents request it. The county has a private contractor trim trees in unincorporated areas every three to five years, paying extra attention to those near electrical wires, county arborist Bill Tidwell said.

The best advice for homeowners, Tidwell said, is to trim their trees in early fall, before the Santa Ana winds start to blow. Fire officials also advise homeowners to clear any dry brush from the ground around their homes.

"Anything that has a branch on it or a frond on it that can either dry or catch fire or blow off in the wind and do damage poses a hazard," Tidwell said. "There's nothing out there that doesn't pose a hazard."