



Safety alert 01/2014

Arborist trapped in cotton palm

Background

An arborist was pruning a cotton palm, also known as Washington Filifera, to remove the large skirt of dead palm leaves (fronds). The cotton palm was situated on a residential block and was approximately 22 metres tall. An elevated work platform (EWP) was unable to be used, as there was not enough room to extend the outriggers and a self-propelled EWP did not have the required reach to access the top of the palm.

The arborist had pruned the majority of the dead fronds when the skirt fell down, trapping him against the trunk of the palm. It took about one and a half hours before emergency services were able to rescue him. Similar incidents have occurred overseas where palm skirts have detached and fallen on climbers, resulting in suffocation. In this case, the arborist sustained severe bruising to the upper body.

Contributing factors

- The cotton palm was approximately 22 metres tall and had not been pruned regularly.
- The arborist was unable to use an EWP.
- The arborist was working from the bottom to the top of the palm.
- It had been raining heavily prior to removal of dead fronds, which may have added to the weight of the skirt.

Action required

1. Where possible, use an EWP. There are EWPs available for hire that may be suitable to access difficult sites.
2. If the palm is not accessible by an EWP and has significant fronds around the trunk (i.e more than two years growth), consider:
 - not pruning the tree at all; or
 - use a pruning method other than a bottom up method, which should only be undertaken by experienced and qualified arborists.
3. When assessing the safest method to prune a cotton palm, consider:
 - the size of the skirt and when the palm was last pruned;
 - the age and height of the palm, i.e free from disease and pests; and
 - weather conditions such as rain, which can cause water to stagnate and rot the skirt, increasing the weight and causing it to loosen and give way.

Further information

Further information can be obtained from www.worksafe.wa.gov.au or by contacting customer service on 1300 307 877 or email safety@commerce.wa.gov.au A13990718

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