

Pole Pruners by Charlie Beck

Pole pruners are a must have tool for the palm gardener. They are helpful for pulling vines and cutting off or pulling down dead fronds. Pruning dead palm fronds is usually more difficult than pruning woody trees. Palm fronds are closely spaced so clearance for the saw is limited. Many palm fronds are springy so they move up and down with the saw blade which makes sawing more difficult. *Hyphaene* fronds are an example of fronds which are hard to saw.

Beware that pole saws should not be used anywhere around electrical power lines. Even a non-conductive pole can be dangerous when wet on the outside or if condensation collects on the inside of the pole. I let professional arborists cut anything that is close to electrical power lines. They are trained in safe practices. Consider wearing eye protection when sawing fronds. Quite a bit of debris comes raining down when sawing fronds. Safety goggles are a good choice. Wearing a hard hat will protect you from heavy, armed fronds falling unpredictably.

Pruning poles come either with self contained telescoping sections or they come with fixed length add on sections. Poles come with one of three types of tool attachments which are "saw only," "combination saw/pruner," and "universal quick change coupler" for changing between saw and pruner. Poles are available in wood, aluminum, and fiberglass. The wooden pole that I have used was inadequate in stiffness. This was a box store product of inferior quality. Arborist supply houses do sell quality wooden poles but I have not tried them. Wooden poles are advertised to be lighter than fiberglass and safer for use around electrical lines. Fiberglass poles come either hollow or with a solid foam core. The hollow poles are lighter. The foam core fiberglass poles are stiffer than hollow poles but are heavier. Solid core fiberglass poles are advertised to be less conductive of electricity due to the foam core that does not allow condensation to form on the inside of the pole. Quality aluminum poles are light and stiff but they are highly conductive of electricity.

Fixed length poles typically come in 6' or 8' lengths. The pole sections are joined with a quick coupler which uses a leaf spring and a pin to lock the lengths together. The disadvantage of this system is the adjustment of length is limited and the need to carry multiple poles around the garden is cumbersome. I have found that the "quick coupler" pin sometimes can pop out and the pole sections can come apart. This usually leaves the saw length of the pole stranded up in the tree and you might need a ladder to reconnect the pole sections. A piece of duct tape around the leaf spring would prevent the pin from popping out.

Telescoping poles are self contained. You can extend the pole to any length within the pole's limits. This is very useful when trimming palm fronds. Poles that are too long or too short make the job of pruning much more difficult. Telescoping poles need some form of locking mechanism to fix the overall length. Most telescoping poles rely on torquing the sections in opposite directions to lock the length. Sometimes this friction joint loosens during the sawing process. This can be very frustrating while you are in the middle of a cut. Some poles have an additional lock nut which stops the joint from loosening. I have

not actually used this product but it seems to be a design improvement. Deluxe telescoping poles employ locking pins and toggle clamps. These poles are the ultimate design. They have plenty of length adjustment but when pinned and clamped, the poles act as if it is a fixed length pole. I have never had any problem with the locking sections coming loose.

Pole length is another variable factor. 12' long poles are fine for immature palms but you will soon be required to use a ladder to trim taller palms. 16' long poles become less stiff due to their additional length. Some 20' long aluminum poles are oval in shape which adds stiffness and directional control. These extra long poles are the ultimate in pruning poles but they are expensive. These poles come with the deluxe locking pin/toggle clamp design. Even though these poles only weigh 8 pounds they are very cumbersome to maneuver in the crown of a palm when extended to its full length. This 20' long pole is for sawing only. Pruning attachments are too heavy to use on poles of this length.

Quality poles come with "quick coupler" ends which can be used to connect a saw or a bypass pruning head. Combination units sold at box stores come with a saw on one side and a pruner head on the other side. This might seem like an advantage to have both tools mounted on the same pole but bypass pruners have limited use in trimming palm fronds. They add weight to the end of the pruner which makes it harder to handle, and the pruner interferes with adjacent petioles making them less maneuverable. It's best to use a saw or a pruner individually. Pole saw heads are designed to fit certain saw blades. You can't assemble a Corona saw blade onto a Jameson saw head. I find most saw blades are of high quality except those bargain basement brands available from low quality sources. Saw blades typically come in 13" or 16" lengths. 16" blades are better but they cost nearly twice as much. Most saw blades cannot be resharpened. It is important to use sharp saw blades. I tend to use the saw blade after its useful life has passed. I'm always amazed how much easier a new blade cuts through petioles. Most pole saw heads come with a hook. This feature is very useful to hang the pole in the tree in between cuts. It is also useful pulling down partially cut fronds or vines. This hook also allows you to hang your pruner in the garage.

Bypass pruner heads have either 1/4" or 3/4" cutting capacities. I use the larger of the two sizes which has a compound pulley. This provides more leverage when cutting larger petioles. Even this large pruner is of limited use in a palm garden. It's fine for cutting *Thrinax* or *Coccothrinax* fronds but it is too small for most palms. I also have a ratchet cut pruning attachment. It has an anvil blade which must be perfectly aligned to complete the cut. This type of pruner has a mechanical advantage due to its ratchet mechanism. You must pull on the rope many times to complete the cut. This is not the tool for cutting through palm fronds. It works better on woody trees. Some fronds are too spongy to let the ratchet mechanism advance to the next pull. These ratchet pruners are also very expensive.

I recommend buying a quality product from an online arborist supply house. These websites provide a lot

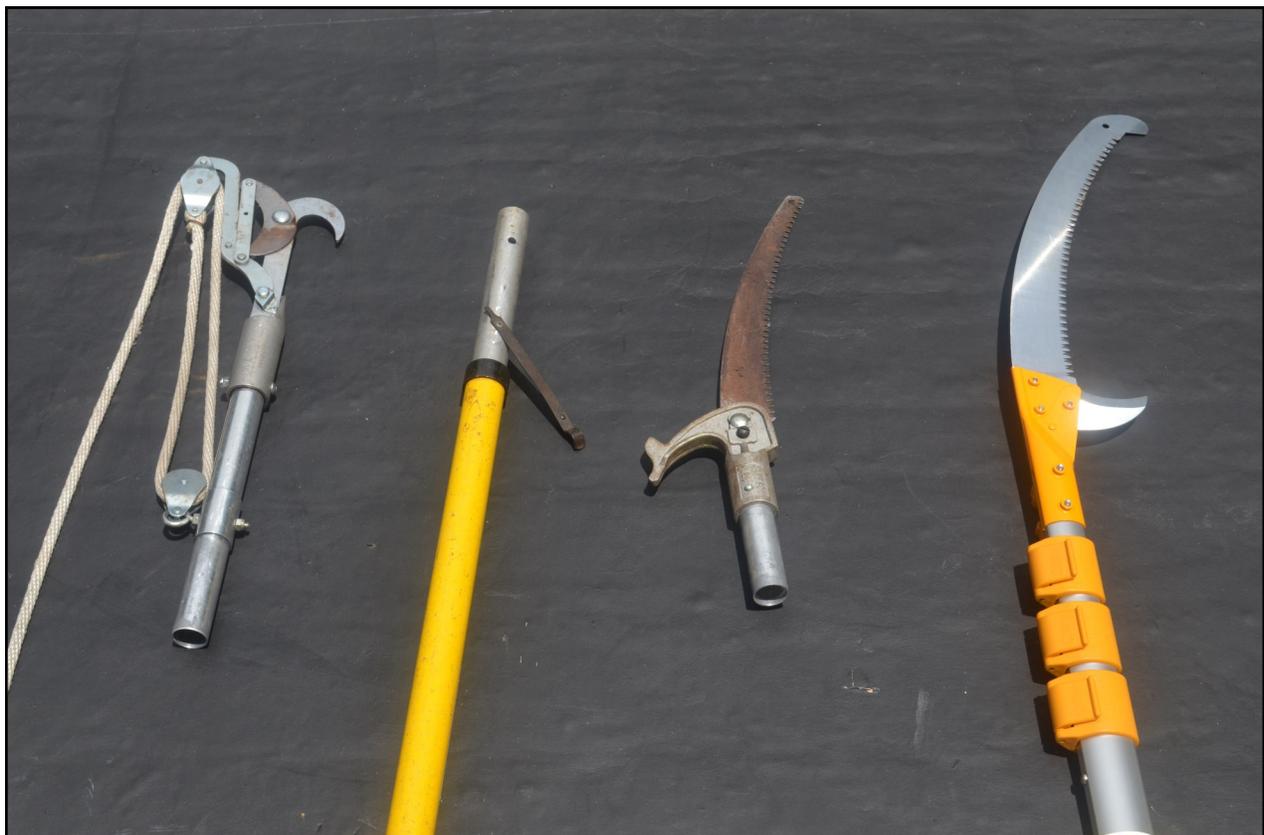
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of guidance in choosing pole pruner tools. I also find that their prices are competitive. Retailers like Amazon also sell these products but Amazon does not lay out all of the options available for this product. I do find that Amazon customer reviews very helpful when determining which pruner to buy. I recommend avoiding pruners from the box stores. Heavy ended combination pruning heads on undersized poles make pruning fronds a real chore. Below I give examples of typical cost of quality pole pruners. (See photo on page 7)

BYPASS PRUNING HEAD	1-1/4 capacity 1-3/4 capacity	\$50-60 \$70-80
POLE SAW HEAD WITH HOOK		\$15-25
SAW BLADE	13" long 16" long 16" long	\$15-20 \$25-40 \$83 (resharpenable)
FIBERGLASS POLE (fixed length)	hollow 6' long hollow 8' long foam core 6' long	\$30 \$35 \$55
ALUMINUM POLE (oval shape including saw head & blade)	12' long 16' long 21' long	\$190 \$225-285 \$275-350

Pole Pruner Tools



LEFT TO RIGHT: Bypass pruner; 12' telescoping pole with "leaf spring/pin" attachment; pole saw head with hanging hook; and 20' long aluminum telescoping pole with locking pins and toggle clamps