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Blooming royal poinciana trees can present royal problems

By Robin Robinson Citizen Columnist

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The regal splendor of the royal poinciana tree bursts into bloom in April and May and fills our skies and then our streets with its claw-shaped blossoms. The deciduous leaves are bi-pinnate with 25 small leaflets that are further divided into another 25 leaflets. They give the tree a slightly drooping grace before they are shed in the spring. The tree is native to Madagascar, but has been exported all over the world. Frequently, it is voted one of the top five flowering trees.

Each tree species has an inherent life span. Oaks can live hundreds of years. Royal poinciana trees have notoriously short life spans. Sadly, that means that trees that you loved as a child will be gone before you are. If the life span of the poinciana is 40 years, at 30 years the tree is in decline and more susceptible to diseases, pathogens and most importantly, termites. The older tree is less flexible in a storm and more vulnerable to wind damage.

An ideal urban forest will have trees of differing ages, so that old trees that are more prone to damage can be removed. Young trees are inherently stronger. That is why the Key West Tree Ordinances require new plantings when any old tree is removed.

Poinciana trees frequently have co-dominant trunks. The areas at their division develop bark inclusions, which weaken the tree and make it more susceptible to breakage. If the tree is pruned to develop a strong central leader when young, this

problem might be avoided. According to University of Florida statistics, the pruned tree will have a 26 percent better chance of surviving strong winds.

When branches break or are improperly or even properly cut off, because the tree is exotic, the wound is more susceptible than native species to invasion by termites, fungus and bacteria. Since many large branches are blown off in a storm, many old poinciana trees develop cavities that allow the invasion by their most volatile visitors, termites. An otherwise healthy-looking tree that is full of termites is a threat to surrounding property.

Another problem occurs with the tree's root systems. Poinciana trees develop buttress roots that extend out over the surface of the ground. The island has shallow soil with a water table at about 18 inches that encourages the root system to grow horizontally. The shallow root systems are easily damaged by something as simple as a car rolling over them. As their canopy is often 40-feet tall and 60-feet wide, ideally, the poinciana needs an empty space 30 feet by 30 feet for its roots to be happy. In the city, sidewalks, curbs, buildings, parking lots, driveways and pools impair root growth and, in turn, the roots impede sidewalk safety. The fecund poinciana will self seed with great gusto and grow in a crack between two buildings where its root structure never has a chance.

If the tree is damaged by weed-eaters or mowers, and the cambium layer that transports nutrients from the roots to the tree trunk and branches is injured, the strength of the tree is weakened.

The area underneath a poinciana tree is allopathic. That is, nothing will grow there. Its red-orange blooms during season create a carpet underneath to make up for the bare ground, but most of the year there is just dirt.

The older the poinciana tree is, the more flamboyant is the intensity of its flowers. The foot-long seedpods are more prolific as well. The tree knows its time is short and puts out a most extravagant display during its final curtain call. Although not

native, poinciana trees are valued as protected Heritage Trees in the Key West Tree Ordinances. To replace old trees, the city's Urban Forester, this year, has planted 14 new poinciana trees on city property that has enough space for them.

Notes

The Key West Garden Club welcomes volunteers to pull weeds, propagate plants, and play in the sandy soil at the West Martello Tower from 9 a.m. to noon every Monday.

Key West Garden Club Master Gardener Robin Robinson was a columnist at the Chicago Daily News and syndicated with Princeton

Features. Her book, "Plants of Paradise," can be found on Amazon.com. This column is part of a series developed by the Key

West Garden Club. Go to www.keywestgardenclub.com.