

Lethal Bronzing Disease of Palms (LBD)

Lethal Bronzing Disease (LBD) is a fatal disease of palm trees caused by a phytoplasma—an invisible, bacteria-like organism that lives inside the tree's sap. It has destroyed thousands of palms and caused millions in property and landscape losses throughout Florida and the Gulf Coast.

What it Does:

Once infected, palms begin to lose color from the lower fronds upward. Fronds turn bronze, fruits may drop early, and eventually the newest central spear leaf collapses—marking the death of the growing bud. Once this happens, the palm cannot recover.

Severity & Impact:

According to the University of Florida (IFAS), once a palm tests positive, it should be removed immediately to prevent spread. There is currently no cure. The disease has caused extensive damage, with estimated losses of several million dollars in nursery and landscape palms.

How It Spreads:

Lethal Bronzing is spread by small sap-feeding insects called planthoppers. They carry the organism from infected palms to healthy ones while feeding. These insects breed in grassy or marshy areas, making coastal and water-adjacent properties more vulnerable.

Current Recommendations:

Because there is no cure, early detection and prevention are critical. University and field research recommend a rotation of preventive trunk injections — applying oxytetracycline (OTC) every three months as a systemic antibiotic, and alternating midway between those treatments with imidacloprid, a systemic insecticide that helps control the insect vectors responsible for spreading the disease. This six-week staggered schedule helps keep consistent protection within the palm's vascular system. Routine health monitoring and rapid removal of infected palms remain essential to reduce further spread to neighboring palms.

References:

University of Florida IFAS Extension – *Lethal Bronzing Disease of Palms (PP163)*

UF Gardening Solutions – 'Lethal Bronzing Disease' Article (2024)

This document is provided for educational purposes. There is currently no known cure for infected palms. Treatments may reduce risk or slow progression but cannot guarantee protection.