



Topic: Whitewash on Palms Outdated

Question: My wife is from Puerto Rico and we were talking about a white substance that she remembers seeing back on the island years ago that was painted onto the trunks of the palm trees from ground level up to around five feet or so. I also remember it on the palms in Southern California when I was young (we're in our 70's now). We haven't seen it here in Southwest Florida and were wondering what it was and why was it done. Is it still done anywhere?

Steve, Fort Myers

Answer: This is mostly an abandoned practice that was quite common in many parts of the world. The product is a very low-cost type of paint made primarily from slaked lime and chalk. It was commonly called whitewash, calsomine, or lime paint. Most often, only the lower trunks of trees were painted. In the tropics, it is said to prevent sun scald and insect damage to trees. In temperate climates, it is said to keep the tree cool so there is less chance of a premature bloom that would be subject to being killed by a late frost. Whitewash was probably the material intended for Tom Sawyer to paint the fence. In the upper Midwest, whitewash was a necessary part of routine barn maintenance. It provided a good coating on rough surfaces and had some hygienic effects. You will still see some trees painted in this manner in only a few places.

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Stephen Brown is a horticulture agent with the Lee County Extension Service. Submit questions by calling the horticulture desk at 533-7504 between 9 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. or by e-mailing brownsh@leegov.com. Visit his Web page at <http://lee.ifas.ufl.edu/hort/GardenHome.shtml>. For native plants click on Publications A-Z.

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