It’s July Fourth, and that means palm trees will be fireballs

You have probably seen them already: the elegant trunks leading to fronds of pure, spitting fire. In California, we go through three reliable stages of July Fourth celebrations: before the events kick off, we are warned that fireworks are dangerous; then, we enjoy the fireworks; finally, we post the videos to social media of palm trees on fire.

Do I need to tell you this is dangerous? I hope you already know
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There is no safe amount of “tree on fire.” If you have seen even one video of a burning palm, you also know they spit embers, burning fronds, and other debris onto nearby trees and structures. Under normal conditions, this is bad. In a drought, it is worse. But it will happen this year. It happens every year.

I have come to think of it as an iconic representation of California. The classic palm tree fire video is shot in or near Los Angeles, though the phenomenon is not limited to Southern California. The most classic palm tree fire video, for me, is not amateur at all. It is Hole’s “Malibu” video.

[embedded content]

The burning palm tree motif is also repeated on the album cover of *Celebrity Skin.* Courtney Love and her bandmates stand in front of a blazing palm. Love stares down at the camera.

Her bandmates, in typical ‘90s fashion, are staring off into space. The palm tree really was on fire, the art director told *Vice*. During the shoot, one of the trees fell.

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Only one species of palm tree, *Washingtonia filifera,* is a California native. The iconic slender palms that line Los Angeles’ streets were imported; they require more water than the Californian desert naturally supplies. Their ubiquity in Los Angeles — and elsewhere in California — speaks to the landscaping ambitions of the early 20th century and to the arrival of imported water. *Celebrity Skin* is dedicated to “the stolen water of Los Angeles and to anyone who ever drowned.”

In the video for “Malibu,” Love and her bandmates stroll through flaming palms. Notably, the trunks and the fronds are lit. Later in the video, fire licks up the trunk of a palm to its canopy. The video is slick; the band doesn’t appear to fear the flames. Malibu did, in fact, burn last year in the Woolsey Fire, which was likely the worst fire to ever hit the city.

The social media posts of flaming palms are, obviously, not nearly as polished. Usually, they contain profanity. Frequently, someone is asking if anyone has called 911. Often, someone has. Sometimes, alarmingly, the person who has called reports that 911 is busy. In the videos that represent the apotheosis of the form, *you can actually hear other fireworks going off in the background.*

[embedded content]

In the above video, you’ll notice several key motifs. Most obviously, there is the profanity: “Oh, shit! This shit about to fall! Get the fuck out the way! Move!” Then, there is the shaky, uncertain camerawork; about 30 seconds in, a finger or thumb appears to cover part of the frame. About halfway

through the video, firefighters show up and begin the process of putting out the fire, which now has spread to several trees and the house below.

No one thinks their fireworks will be the ones to set the tree on fire. It is the only explanation I can think of. And while fireworks-related palm tree fires are not limited to the Fourth of July — one especially spectacular video comes from New Year's Eve celebrations — they do tend to appear in droves around the holiday. Professional shows can take up to two years to plan; amateur shows are less carefully choreographed. If you're less video-focused, you can search Twitter for "palm tree fire" on July 5th. Some of the tweets have photos attached; many are simply commentary.

Fireworks are illegal in Los Angeles, but that law is frequently broken. Illegal fireworks are also common in Oakland, San Francisco, and Berkeley. Fireworks of all kinds are illegal in many of the most populous places in Northern and Southern California, including San Jose, San Diego, and Mountain View. Some localities, like Anaheim and Fresno, will allow certain kinds of fireworks on certain days, but banned fireworks occur there, too. On July 1st, Cal Fire seized 15,000 pounds of illegal fireworks from a spot near Nevada.

[embedded content]

The video quality is usually low; light is usually supplied only by the fire itself. The videos that are most reassuring are the ones in which the firefighters arrive and begin administrating water before the clip ends. This does not occur in all flaming palm tree videos. Sometimes, horribly, the viewer simply witnesses the sparks flying off the palms. The fire wants to spread. The fire always wants to spread.

It is while watching flaming palm tree videos that I am most acutely aware of the time-distortion that comes from video. I am watching the past. The reality of the video is the now that

was. Most likely, the palm tree is already out by the time I have seen the footage. If the fire spread, it has already spread and — one hopes — was, at some point, contained.

Without intervention, a palm tree can burn for hours. They are incredibly effective torches in that sense. And if the trees haven't been maintained — if there are old, dry, very flammable fronds — they're especially combustible. Why is it, then, that I am doing an aesthetic consideration of the videos that appear on social media rather than warning you about the very real dangers of burning down your own neighborhood?

[embedded content]

The answer to that question is the above video, in which another palm tree is on fire. Around 0:35, someone comments, with resignation, while panning the camera over to the sparks flying off the road: "And they're still shooting off fireworks."

https://www.theverge.com/2019/7/4/20678008/july-4th-fireworks-danger-trees-palm-fire-burning-videos-fail