The Plant Doctor's LANDSCAPE TIPS

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HURRY UP . . . AND WAIT . . . ASAP: Common Tree Healthcare Management Scenarios

INTRODUCTION

For many years, I have been asked to evaluate the health of trees and accompanying landscapes at quite diverse locations (Photos 1 & 2). These requests may originate from Condominium HOAs (Home Owners Associations), Condominium Management Companies, Retail Stores/Shopping Mall Managers, Arborists/Landscapers, Federal and Local Government facilities and Private Property Owners . . . among others. It is often the case that my assistance is needed ASAP (As Soon As Possible). Regardless of the concerns at hand during my visit, I can usually count on the lawn receiving abundant attention and inputs while trees and shrubs are often ignored (Photo 3).

Certain factors may have triggered the need for a rapid response. Perhaps a dead tree from a nearby woodland fell on a condo unit and now everyone in the community is worried about trees falling on their own units or onto paths used for exercise (joggers and walkers) or for nature lovers. Perhaps a Master Gardener or Tree Hugger joined the Tree Committee of the Golden Oaks Community HOA and has brought attention regarding several declining trees. Perhaps a construction project is planned at an upscale outdoor mall and there is a need to protect existing trees from construction damage. Or perhaps, the condominium owners or private property owners are not satisfied with the results of their expenditures into plant healthcare at their locations.

Photos 1 & 2: I have been asked to provide healthcare advice on very diverse landscapes, ranging from those that have significant investment (Photo 1) to those with lesser inputs (Photo 2). They are all important for our industry to provide the services with which we pride ourselves as professionals.

Photo 3: When managing trees and landscapes, one foregone conclusion is that we can usually expect lawns to receive more attention and investment than trees. In general, I think consumers expect that trees require little maintenance and will be with us forever while lawns require constant inputs such as mowing, fertilization and weed control.

Following are several common tree health scenarios that seem to be repeating themselves over the years. Because many of these scenarios concern procrastination that devolve into panic attacks and assorted aggressive reactions, please allow me to present some rather famous quotes from some very smart and prominent people.

"Never put off for tomorrow what you can do today." -Thomas Jefferson

"Never put off till tomorrow what may be done the day after tomorrow just as well…" - Mark Twain

"Only put off until tomorrow what you are wiling to die having left undone." - Pablo Picasso

"Anything worth putting off is worth abandoning altogether." - Epictetus

"If it weren't for the last minute, nothing would get done" - Rita Mae Brown

All of the following scenarios are factual events and have often been repeated over the decades in slightly different venues and aspects. The names have been changed, obviously, and some of the details have been embellished, if ever so slightly.

Scenario #1: "Wants Lower Bids Fast"

"Hi Mr. Tree Doctor, we have had the company, Trees R Us, manage the health of our trees in our condominium complex for the last four years. Most of the residents in our association are happy with the service they are providing but wonder if they are being taken for a ride. They seem somewhat expensive. Based on members' recommendations, we've asked three other companies to submit bids. Because some of the companies want to begin treatments next week, we need your help fast. Can you please evaluate these bids for us and make recommendations ASAP? Thanks a bunch!" - Catherine B. Frugal, March 12, 2020.

Discussion: One of the most common occurrences I find myself in is the fact that people seem to wait until the last minute to seek assistance, the primary reason I included the quotes above. Obviously, it is difficult to assess bids for several reasons. First, I find that bids range in price all over the map for the same service. I've seen bids vary by as much as 2X to 3X the cost of other bids, for the same work. I do not like to assign costs to services; we live in a country of Capitalism and not fixed pricing. One company might charge more because they do a better job . . . then again, perhaps not. Of considerable importance, depending on the time of year, it can be difficult to evaluate the health of trees or the incidence of diseases and pests. In this example (a real case in March 2020), I honestly responded that I could not offer with great accuracy the advice on what treatments need to be applied that year. When deciduous trees are dormant, they are difficult to assess for many health aspects (Photo 4A). It may even be difficult to identify the species of tree, especially if some exotic trees were installed - and I usually don't want to take the time to key them out. I find that conifers are easy to assess almost any time of year (Photo 4B) . . . but deciduous trees and shrubs are not easily assessed health-wise during the dormant season. Perhaps a company can

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simply identify the primary species present on site and provide the standard treatments for those species as they might on every site - "the one size fits all service". I am more prone for a tailored service even though it may be more expensive; many arborists and landscapers I work with try to accommodate what is actually desired or needed. Like tailor-made clothes, it seems to be human nature that we all want a great service that is specific to our expectations, but we generally don't want to pay for that tailored service. We want it cheap!

In this scenario, I expressed my reservations about definitive recommendations and offered to visit in March (for conifer assessment for year 2020) and again in mid to late summer for deciduous assessments (in preparation for year 2021). They accepted my proposal. When I arrived in late July, I witnessed a much different scene than in March (Photos 4C & 4D). A typical dilemma now presented itself using the apple scab disease example as noted in Photos 4C & 4D. Apparently different species of crabapple were installed – some are resistant to scab (fungal disease) and some are susceptible. There are several options for managing just this one disease at this condominium site: 1) The most expensive plan is to catalog all those crabapple trees and only treat the scab-susceptible ones (a rather laborious task and difficult for applicators to track), 2) The medium price range is to treat all trees as though they are susceptible, and 3) The least expensive is to treat none of the trees. Perhaps a 4th option is a gradual replacement of all scab-susceptible trees with resistant varieties. Scab is in general not lethal and many of the condo owners may not care or even notice early defoliation from the disease. When I evaluate trees at certain sites, I try to present all options so that residents/HOAs can decide what is important to them and what is within their budget. Hence, I try to prioritize the issues at each site from a tree health perspective. And I'd urge all arborists and landscape practitioners to do the same. After all, tar spot on maple is not nearly as serious as Oak Wilt. Arborists and landscapers who try to treat every itsy bitsy issue, even when there might not be a rationale for it (Photo 4E), often price themselves out of the market and/or provide the stimulus for clients to seek bids.

Photos 4A & 4B: We are often asked to provide bids on a rushed schedule days before we begin each new season of landscape maintenance. Deciduous trees and shrubs are very difficult to assess health-wise during the dormant months while evergreen/conifers are rather easy to identify specific pests and diseases year-round. The conifers in Photo 4B exhibited Diplodia Tip Blight, Dothistroma Needle Blight and an incidence of Pine Root Collar Weevil (tree on left).

Photos 4C & 4D: When arriving at the site in Photos 4A & 4B in late July, assessment of deciduous problems was rather straight forward. At this condo site, like many other locations in Michigan, the fungal disease, apple scab, was present, and many trees were already exhibiting significant leaf loss (4D & Inset). Many of the crabapple trees established here years ago were scab-resistant varieties (Photo 4C) while many other varieties were scab-susceptible (4D). The dilemma for us as plant healthcare providers as well as for the HOA is how to manage the problem. Do we treat all as if they are susceptible or do we catalog and treat only those that are susceptible, an onerous task? Or do we not treat any crabapples and gradually replace scab-susceptible with scab-resistant varieties?

Photo 4E: Not easily assessed during the dormant period (March) was the incidence of Trellis Rust (TR) on ornamental pears on site. This photo shows a low incidence of TR, which would generally not support the need for treatments. However, we could also justify treatments if we want to prevent buildup of the disease over time. Like many other issues, management of TR is really a judgement call that should be discussed with the property owners or HOA.

Scenario #2: "Need Advice Quick!"
"Hi Dr. Roberts, we have had Git Er Cut Tree Service maintain our trees for the last four years. Whenever we have a tree problem or one of our community members notices a problem with the trees, Git Er Cut always seems to want to cut them down. They offer us great deals on removal costs, but we wonder if we're doing the right thing. With the spring about upon us and pressure for renewing their contract, can you advise us quickly? Thanks!" - Dan Remover, HOA President, Barren Flats Condominium Association.

Discussion: Well . . . In our industry, many companies try to do all things whether it be lawn service, tree removals or landscape maintenance. With that being said, most companies specialize in certain services. For example, some companies devote most of their resources to tree trimming and tree removals, possibly with a small side division of plant healthcare. Obviously, their forte is tree cutting of some sort and will likely advance their expertise in that arena if at all possible as their business model is to make money. Some of our clients do not want to invest long term in the health of trees and would rather have them

Photo 5: This common area at Barren Flats Condominiums is named "Central Park". If you've ever been to New York City's famous Central Park, it bears little resemblance. Git Er Cut Tree Service is running out of work at this site.

removed for a one-time cost or avoid planting them altogether (Photo 5).

Scenario #3: "Name Dropping & Dissatisfied with Treatments"

"Hi Dr. Bobs, Joe at Can't Hardly Tree Service recommended I contact you. If you recall, we had you out 5 years ago to provide advice on an Oak Wilt outbreak on our property after we had our trees trimmed in the spring. Your advice worked out great, and we have had no recurrence of that dreaded disease. Now, I'm reaching out to you again. Our spruce trees are declining from Rhizosphaera needlecast (Photos 6A & 6B), at least that's what we've been told; we've had another company treat our trees for several years, and the trees just don't seem to be responding. We are investing a substantial amount of our budget into our landscape and trees and would like them to be healthy and appear great. In the case of the spruce trees, it appears to be a losing battle. The third treatment is scheduled for next week, and I'm not sure it would be worthwhile. Can you help?" - Mike Picea, Pine Tree Ridge Road, Conifer, Michigan.

Photos 6A & 6B: After paying for needlecast sprays for several years, Mr. Picea wondered why his trees were still declining. As it turned out, the timing of the treatments was wrong. Hopefully, adjustments to treatment timing will reverse the decline and eventual development of dead branches.

Photos 7A-7D: Most of the alcoves at this condo site contain either a Serviceberry or a Magnolia. In 7A however, a Siberian Elm is emerging into the skyline and will eventually crowd out the Magnolia. In 7B, the Serviceberry is crowded in the front by a Norway maple and in the back by a large maple (having lost its leaves in the fall). Both instances may be volunteer trees that residents allowed to grow or perhaps were planted. Either way, crowding and sidewalk upheaval and foundation problems may develop. In 7C, a typical, overgrown, competitive condition has been allowed to occur at this site; note a Colorado Blue spruce is trying to survive by reaching for sunlight (center). In Photo 7D, these arbs were planted to provide a dense screen to hide this utility box. Unfortunately, Bambi has exposed the utility.

Discussion: When Mike contacted me, he asked me to visit his property and assess the situation. Upon my arrival at Mr. Mike's residence, I immediately determined that the primary problem was, in fact, Rhizosphaera needlecast. I couldn't understand why there was so much needlecast if trees were being treated regularly over the last several years. I asked Mike which fungicides were being applied; he told me – the chemicals applied seemed reasonable. When I queried Mike on the treatment schedule, he replied that the trees are receiving three treatments per year: one in June, one in July, and one in August. I thought the treatment schedule seemed rather odd, so, I asked Mike which company was doing the treatments. Mike was rather hesitant to disclose that information but finally said that when he complained about the lack of control, the company proclaimed they were following "Dr. Roberts' Protocols". While I have conveyed in lectures and publications that Rhizosphaera can attack spruce trees at almost any time during the warm season, the primary period of infection is in the spring. An adjustment of the treatment schedule should yield better results.

Scenario #4: "Right Tree, Right Place"

"Dear David, I am with the Ah Ah Ah American Condominium Management Company of Michigan (a good name for 1st place in the phone book!). We manage quite a few condominium sites; many of the older ones established 25+ years ago have become overgrown, perhaps because of the crowded plantings during development many years ago and the lack of care during the ensuing years. Would you mind visiting some of our sites and evaluate what we should do about fixing and restoring the landscapes?" - Etta Wright-Place

Discussion: Or "Right Tree, Wrong Place". Or "Wrong Tree, Right Place". We often encounter landscape designs that when installed several decades ago seemed to fit the bill. However, as those landscapes mature, the trees can outgrow their original sites and now need restoration or rejuvenation (Photos 7A-7D). At one site, the buildings were designed with an alcove in between two attached units (Photos 7A & B). Typically, as is common with landscape architectural designs, the trees are repetitive throughout the landscape. At this location, either Magnolia or Serviceberry were utilized in the alcove (Photo 7A Magnolia & 7B Serviceberry in back). Lack of maintenance on the Magnolias has led to establishment of Magnolia scale and sooty mold. Of interest, however, is that other trees were planted or became established as volunteer trees. In

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7A, a Siberian elm is quickly overshadowing the Magnolia, and in 7B a maple (lost leaves in fall) is topping out over the Serviceberry (reddish, back corner) while a Norway Maple will soon over-arch the Serviceberry in front. Both the elm and maple may lift sidewalks and could cause foundation damage. At another site, a very common occurrence at many locations, trees have outgrown their sites and are crowding one another (Photo 7C). It is sometimes difficult to provide advice on these situations when residents have no preference for a particular species and/or are hesitant to remove any trees to decrease the competition. In some cases, I simply recommend that they be left alone to "fight it out", as is the case with many situations in nature. In other situations, some species of trees are not optimal in some locations (Photo 7D); while arborvitae can make good "evergreen" screens for property boundaries or to hide utilities, they are nonetheless susceptible to wildlife. Better for this particular case would be "Green Giant" arbs (or other species), which are less prone to attract Bambi damage than other varieties.

Scenario #5: "What Trees?"

"Hey Dr. Dave, I've got a favor to ask. Would you be willing to visit a gated community and evaluate the health of the trees there? The residences are rather upscale with nicely maintained landscapes. But the trees have not received much attention over the last 30 years since the community was developed by Exquisite But Pricey Development Corporation. Many of the trees are in decline, and some have outgrown their allotted space, encroaching onto sidewalks and streets. Furthermore, there are abundant diseases and pests that need attention if the decline of the trees is to be stopped or reversed. I'm planning to bid on the maintenance contract but think they also need to be encouraged to budget for and implement a tree replacement program. I thought if I hired you to provide an independent evaluation of their needs, perhaps they could be convinced of the need to gradually invest in their landscape and trees now rather than wait for disaster to strike with the accompanying costly investments to restore the community to its former glory. The name of the place is Tiffany & Kardashian Estates. What do you think?" - Crystal Rothschild, Discount Tree & Landscape Experts.

Discussion: While we might expect affluent communities to invest greater budget allotments in trees than less affluent ones, such is not always the situation. It is not unusual for arborists to contact me and seek help by giving impartial evaluations on trees and their care at specific locations. Condominium HOAs often believe arborists are simply out to sell more or do unnecessary work when in fact there are legitimate reasons to plan ahead; arborists obviously know more about trees than the typical property owner who may not understand the plethora of issues that trees encounter. If nothing else, it is wise for members of our industry to provide options as insurance against forgetful members of the community or HOAs who might claim they were never warned about impending issues, which could be rather costly to fix. Some of the more common issues we may encounter at neglected sites, even affluent sites, include "outgrown" trees (Photo 8A), lack of proper pruning resulting in strangulation of branches (Photo 8B), girdling roots (Photo 8C), and tree/shrub decline (Photos 8D & 8E). Many of these issues could have been averted with moderate investments in tree care on an annual basis rather than panic when major problems develop.

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Photo 8A

Photo 8B

Photo 8C

Photo 8D

Photo 8E

Photos 8A-8E: At an affluent condominium site established 25-30 years ago, many trees are now outgrowing their rather confined sites; note proximity of spruce to residential home (8A). Due to neglect, serious branch strangulation from lack of proper pruning (8B) and girdling root issues (8C) are resulting in tree decline. In Photo 8D, many of the conifers (spruce and pine) are declining due to confined conditions, age, stress, poor irrigation management, etc. Years ago, this utility (Photo 8E) was initially hidden by installation of three taxus shrubs; the one on the left is now barely surviving, the one on the right is dead, and the one in the middle has been taken over by a boxelder and a buckthorn, both of which are being pruned by someone into the shape of the original shrub!