



The Plant Doctor's DIARY

By Dr. David L. Roberts, *The Plant Doctor LLC a.k.a. The Tree Doctor*

MY FIRST YEAR IN THE REAL WORLD

INTRODUCTION

Almost a year has lapsed since my retirement from Michigan State University in October 2018. Although I had started The Plant Doctor, LLC business over 10 years ago, my specific intent was two-fold: 1) reserve the business name under the same moniker that I have written articles for *the Landsculptor* for several decades, and 2) stay somewhat active and connected to the plant industry after I retired. I thought it might be interesting to review a few of my experiences as a novice in the “Real World of Business,” now apart from Academia . . . although I have always considered myself a realist and pragmatist in touch with both academia and the real world.

The following represent some of my real-life experiences I've encountered since my retirement. I realize that these incidents are not that uncommon for many of the readers of my articles. But perhaps upon living vicariously through my experiences, my colleagues in the industry might be able to offer me some advice on how to proceed into my future and my second career. Note: the names and locations have been changed to protect the innocent . . . and the guilty.

LILLIAN – “BUT I’M 80 YEARS OLD”

Lillian, near Rockford Michigan, contacted me because she had several “dying trees and plants” in her landscape. When her arborist couldn't figure out the cause(s) of her plant problem(s), he suggested she call “Dr. Roberts.” Lillian revealed her issues that suggested her plants were indeed declining and dying, but I was perplexed by her descriptions of the issue. She asked if I could come to her home to diagnose the problems before all of her “plants were dead.” I replied that I could probably stop by but that I would need to charge her for my visit. She immediately replied, “But I’m 80 Years Old” . . . as her voice began to quiver and soften in volume

in a painful, stressful sort of manner. Ensuing conversation suggested she was living on a “fixed income” and, from her description, she was practically destitute. I told her of my retirement and that I couldn't respond for free as I often did on behalf of MSU. Again, she replied, “But I’m 80 years old”, as her voice became weaker and weaker . . . and even more raspy. I began to wonder if she was starting to faint or have a heart attack or . . . God forbid, the end might be near. I thought about asking her for her address so that, if need be, I could call 911, but realized by this time that she was beyond help from my end . . . at least by the struggle for her to speak. I even thought that perhaps the paramedics could locate her phone by GPS. I’m a sucker for “older people” even though, according to many, I now fit into this category. I was a little cautious about relenting to her pleadings for a free visit due to a little niggling voice in the back of my mind; after all, how can one run a business if I am to succumb to the possibility of being played as an ignorant person? Please don't misunderstand me, when it comes to the elderly, I have the deepest passion and respect for our former generations who helped make this country great and who have so many experiences to tell. I open their doors, carry their groceries, fix issues in their homes and even occasionally visit them in hospitals and nursing homes. After several more, “But I’m 80 years old” in a very weakened, pleading voice, Lillian and I finally agreed upon a price, which wasn't much more than some “coffee money.” I relented in my originally planned consultation fee, hoping she'd be spared from the stress of this “costly” venture.

Upon arrival at Lillian's home several days later, I realized she had a much nicer home in a nicer neighborhood than I had (Photo 1). As I walked by her garage, I spied her Mercedes. And when Lillian emerged from her home in a very confident stride, she appeared extremely fit and didn't look a day



Photo 1: Lillian's home.



Photo 2

Photo 2: Lillian's three lilacs were affected differentially (Inset) by

Imazapyr herbicide found in her spot treatments with her arsenal of herbicides (Roundup 365 and Ortho Ground Clear). I told her that all three were likely to survive but that she must be patient for a year or so.

over 66 if that . . . and certainly not near the “80 years old” she had portrayed herself. Furthermore, her voice possessed no evidence of the raspy, weakened condition I heard over the phone. Did she recover? If she was 80 years old, I can only hope I can be in such great shape at that age!

As she guided me towards her troubled plants, her personal gardener joined us. Lillian took me to her first group of afflicted plants, some lilacs in her garden beds (Photo 2 & Inset). I immediately recognized the telltale signs of herbicide injury. I wasn't quite sure how to proceed with such a quick diagnosis. She asked me what I thought. I hesitated but before I could answer, she asked if I knew what was wrong. I replied that I was fairly certain of the cause but would like to see

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some of her other afflicted plants. Next, she took me to her climbing hydrangea on the gate to her garden. Her climbing hydrangea showed similar stunting and leaf distortions as her lilacs (Photo 3 & Inset), confirming what I already knew as the cause of the problem. She again asked if I knew what was wrong with her plants. Again, I responded that I was "pretty certain", but that I needed to ask her a couple of questions. I asked her if she used herbicides. She replied "yes". I asked to see her herbicide containers, which she acknowledged she kept in her garage (Photo 4). I explained that it was the imazapyr component in her Roundup 365 and Ortho Ground Clear that had caused the problem. She glared at me and exclaimed, "How could you figure it out so fast?" I looked her in the eye



Photo 3

Photo 3: Lilian's climbing hydrangea was also affected differentially (Inset) by the Imazapyr component of the herbicides, depending on where she zapped certain weeds in her paver bricks.



Photo 4

Photo 4: The two herbicides responsible for Lillian's plant problems were Roundup 365 and Ortho Ground Clear, both of which contain Imazapyr. Luckily, her spot treatment rather than broadcast spray had not done sufficient harm to kill her plants.

prepared for her next comment, which, fortunately, never came; I expected her to say that because I had figured it out so quickly, I should charge her even less than the "coffee money". If need be, I was all prepared with my reply, "If you needed brain surgery, would you want a surgeon who charges you \$100,000 but who has never lost a patient or one who charges you \$50,000 but who has lost half of his patients on the operating table?"

LEE – "A MAN OF YOUR CALIBER"

I was contacted by a property owner who claimed he and his wife enjoyed reading my articles. He wasn't a member of our industry so I honestly didn't know that many ordinary Michiganders actually subscribed to *the Landscaptor* and read the articles therein. He related he lived along the Looking Glass River and that he had a number of ailing trees. Because I was extremely busy at the time, I asked him to remind me in a week or so and I'd make every effort to schedule an appointment to visit his home. In his reminder email he related,

"Dear Plant Doctor: I hope this reminder can entice you to visit our home and examine a few of our ailing trees. Our schedule is fairly open this month, with the exception of September 26-29. By way of encouragement, I can say that the two outdoor cats that have adopted us run from strangers rather than attack them, we are up-to-date on our shots and have no communicable diseases, and everyone who comes to our house is offered a free Klondike Bar and/or soft drink." ~ Lee

My first thought upon receiving this message was "Uh oh, here's another client hoping for a charity visit." Because he was located approximately 35 miles from my home (office), I politely asked him in my email response if he would mind paying mileage and a modest consultation fee. His reply was,

"Dave, We never expected your services to be pro bono, although I'm sure you have encountered people who thought you worked for free. Whatever you charge for the services from a man of your caliber is a great bargain for us. We look forward to having the benefit of your counsel with respect to the prospect of our ailing trees." ~ Lee

Whew, what a nice reply! Would I be too greedy to ask for a Klondike bar and a soft drink?

GROSSE POINTE "EFFLUENCE"

I was contacted by Deborah who lived in the Grosse Pointe area, which we know as fairly affluent. She asked if I could come by for a consultation. I replied that I could. She asked what I would charge. I told her I would need to charge her at least mileage from my home and a modest consultation fee. She then asked if I could treat her trees and trim them. I replied, "No Ma'am, I don't treat trees or trim them. I provide unbiased, expert advice in a Plant Healthcare Advisory capacity and do not have any conflicts of interest." She then replied that she may as well hire an arborist. I replied that was her choice. She asked for some names, and I provided several. Win some, lose some.

ARBORIST IN SMALL CLAIMS COURT

John, an arborist with whom I have occasionally interacted with over the years and who occasionally talks old cars with me, called to explain a serious dilemma he found himself in. When a straight-line wind broke off a honey locust tree 15-20 feet up its trunk, the tree's owners were panic-stricken and asked John to promptly remove the tree because the tree blocked their egress from their home through the front door. John, in his ever-keen sense of responsibility, sidelined his regular clients to help the couple who were partially stranded in their home by the structurally failed honey locust. When performing the task of taking down the still standing portion of the honey locust trunk, it accidentally broke a small branch from a nearby honey locust tree. In realizing this error by his crew, John performed some free additional services to hopefully placate the homeowners who claimed that the broken branch caused a lopsided tree in their front yard (Photo 5). The homeowners saw an opportunity to renege on much of the bill and only offered \$900 of the total \$1800 of charges John had planned to charge for his services. Within 24 hours, the homeowners withdrew the



Photo 5

Photo 5: The honey locust on the right indeed appeared lopsided, not from a small broken branch but from competition from the adjacent honey locust, which failed structurally in a straight-line wind and had to be completely removed.

\$900 offer and filed a small claims court suit claiming \$6,000 in damages. John now faced being at least \$7,800 deficient in his business and asked me to visit the site and write an impartial report, which I did. In my report, I noted that while the tree was indeed lopsided, the uneven appearance of the tree was due to prior crowding from the other (failed) honey locust, among other aspects (such as decay in the injured branch, etc.). During the court proceedings, the homeowners had hired two experts who in their reports claimed that the injury caused the tree to become lopsided and dangerous. They further claimed that the tree needed to be removed, which if necessary, would incur even more expenses for John. The Judge then asked John for his explanation. According to John's elated discussion during a phone call immediately after the hearing, John produced my report and explained what had actually happened (from John's point of view). The Judge examined my report and said, "I know Dr. Roberts". He then asked the homeowners if they had seen Dr. Roberts' report. They said "no". The judge then asked them if they wanted to see Dr. Roberts' report. They replied, "no". The judge then read the "Conclusions" of my report to the court, stood up, and said, "Case dismissed".

OAK WILT

I receive quite a few questions every year beginning in mid to late July regarding Oak Wilt. Here are a couple examples:

Daniel pruned his oak tree in June to provide better clearance for his mowing operation (Photo 6). Regrettably, the pruned oak (Photo 7) contracted Oak Wilt from overland transmission of the Oak Wilt fungus. Daniel was a rather young man



Photo 6



Photo 7

Photo 6 & 7: Daniel, who never had heard of Oak Wilt before, pruned his oak in May (Photo 6) to provide better clearance for lawn maintenance. Within a month, leaves started cascading down and was very typical of an Oak Wilt infection (Photo 7). Lab tests confirmed Oak Wilt.

and was quite technologically capable. He visited the web and figured out for himself that he had Oak Wilt after the leaves started dropping from his pruned oak tree. Luckily, his prompt action made it fairly easy at this stage of infection to remediate the infection at his landscape site.

Another property owner recently informed me that her oak trees contracted Oak Wilt when some arborists were removing a tree and accidentally injured some branches on her nearby oaks. Moral of the story: never injure oaks during the primary season of overland transmission of Oak Wilt by sap beetles!

VIOLA!!!!

Linda, whose husband was a member of our industry and who passed away several years ago, asked me to visit and evaluate her landscape. Apparently, she was becoming overwhelmed with all the duties her husband used to perform; and, she claimed she still received *the Landsculptor* and read all my articles with great interest. Among advice she requested for her trees, she also asked how to "get rid of" this weed in her flower bed (Photo 8). I suggested she try repeated applications of glyphosate or another herbicide. She replied that she feared glyphosate and chemicals in general because of all the cancer advertisements by attorneys on television. She apparently desired to be as organic as possible. I asked her if she



Photo 8

Photo 8: Linda was concerned about this weed that had invaded her flower bed, as well as the chemicals that would be needed to eliminate it. After some discussion, we determined that it might be best to leave it and actually propagate it, if she wasn't all that interested in having a pristine landscape according to the "Jones."

had ever tried physical removal. "Yes, but it keeps coming back." She related she even tried vinegar and some other organic means to no avail. Now, I'm in somewhat of a quandary on what to advise if she doesn't like traditional chemical herbicides and has failed with "organic" approaches. In thinking about her and now my dilemma, I asked her what plans she has for the bed. After a bit of thinking, she replied that she really didn't have any plans for it. So, the most logical solution suddenly revealed itself to me. At the risk of antagonizing lawn care professionals and professional landscapers, I said, "Well, why don't you just let it be and even propagate it since it is spreading and creating a nice ground cover for that area." Slightly perplexed, she thought about it for a minute and then seemed genuinely relieved that she didn't have to abide by everyone else's expectations of the definition of a weed and the need for a pristine landscape. Linda's weed dilemma was resolved efficiently and organically!!!

By the way, I recently saw an advertisement that Ortho Ground Clear will control Ground Ivy (Photo 9, aka Creeping Charlie). This broad-spectrum herbicide with glyphosate and imazapyr might very well control Ground

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Photo 9

Photo 9: While most people consider Ground Ivy (Creeping Charlie) a weed, it actually grows just fine where turf is not likely to grow so well. Mowed on right, unmowed on left.



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Ivy but because Ground Ivy is often found in shaded areas beneath trees, the product is very likely to "control" the tree as well.

WHAT'S THIS?

I received quite a few text and email queries daily while serving our industry as the Plant Doctor, both before retirement and after. Here are just a few:

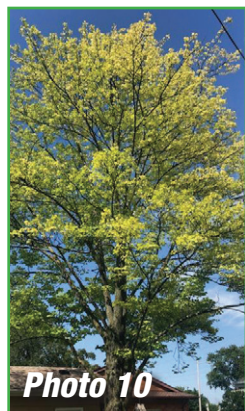


Photo 10

What's This? (Photo 10): I wanted to reply, "I think it's a tree." When people send me photos without including information about the photo and their inquiry, it now becomes a burden for me to respond by having to ask questions through my responses via

texts or emails. It really slows down the process, and I am often slow to respond if I must do a lot of work to coax the information out of the inquirer. In some instances, I never respond because I am simply too busy.

What's This? (Photo 11): It appears to be a Longhorn beetle, perhaps the Pine Sawyers Beetle if found on conifers. It does



Photo 11

not appear to be the Asian Longhorned Beetle, thank goodness!

What's This? (Photo 12): An arborist texted me this photo and asked what was the problem, saying he had never seen it before. I replied that it appears to be the Cynipid Wasp Gall on White Oak and that I had published an



Photo 12

article on this pest in the *Landscaptor* several years back. A couple minutes later the arborist wrote, "Found it! January 2014!". The arborist explained that his daughter catalogues all of my articles both by topic and by date, the reason he could locate it so fast.

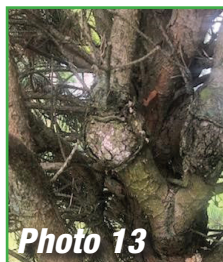


Photo 13

What's This? (Photo 13): An arborist texted me this photo and asked if this was an insect gall. By its appearance, I could immediately determine that it was Western Gall

Rust (not Eastern Gall Rust), a fungal rust disease, that only occurs on Scotts pine.

What's This (Photo 14): Looks like "Plant Lice" (aka Bark Lice) to me.



Photo 14

BOXWOOD BLIGHT NOT!

A very common question during the spring and early summer was about Boxwood Blight, a serious, introduced fungal disease. Although Boxwood Blight was inadvertently introduced into Michigan via some nursery stock, the disease has not become a major threat at this time. Because of the widespread publicity about the disease, many people have become quite paranoid. In most cases I looked at this year, boxwoods were affected by deicing salts (Photo 15) and winter injury.



Photo 15

Photo 15: While Boxwood Blight is a real concern for one of our industry's leading foundation plants, most problems we see with boxwoods are deicing salt injury and winter injury.

In some cases, the stem tissue and buds were viable indicating the shrubs had the potential for recovery.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been a very interesting year in my retirement from academia to the business world. After this first year, I feel I can still make some valuable contributions to this great industry of ours. I did not advertise, did not print up business cards and did little to develop my website, where I eventually hope to post all my 100's of articles. As it turned out, I was plenty busy without all of the attention to my business accoutrements.

My greatest challenge is trying to encourage users of my business, my expertise and my experience to pay for those available services. It seems people don't want to pay for knowledge and information as readily as they will pay for other services such as pruning, fertilizations and treatments for diseases and pests. It's especially challenging for all the texts and emails I receive; apparently people expect such "simple inquiries" to be free even though I devote significant time and resources (computers, smart phone, etc.) to be available for them. Although I occasionally charged clients at least for travel (mileage and expenses) to sites while employed at MSU (because MSU expected us to bring in funds to support our programs), I did a lot of pro bono service work for members of the plant industry, according to MSU's Land Grant Mission. If anyone has any advice for me in my present small business situation, I'd love to hear from you. I enjoy my work and as long as I can make a little extra money for coffee, I hope to continue in this capacity into the foreseeable future. And at my age as a member of the AARP crowd, did I tell you I like free stuff . . . such as free coffee? ☺

Dr. David Roberts has retired from Michigan State University but intends to remain active with the industry. He is CEO and CBW (Chief Bottle Washer) for The Plant Doctor, LLC. Contact information: 248/320-7124 and treedoctordave@gmail.com.