Is Arboriculture Worth It?

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Arboriculture is a difficult and challenging profession. With automobile repair, the technology has advanced so much that in many situations, a professional auto mechanic can simply hook up the D-5000 Truthiness Engine Analyzer to find out which trouble codes are set and which sensors are malfunctioning, most likely eliciting the reason the car is not running well or not running at all. In human health, there are CT Scanners, MRI's etc. that can "look inside" a patient to possibly find the cause of the ailment. Furthermore, medical doctors can talk to their human patients to obtain background information that may be valuable for diagnosing and resolving an illness.

In the plant health care industry, we are often at a disadvantage because we do not have the sophisticated equipment and plants usually do not talk to us about their woes…at least not to me. As our human culture advances into the 21st century with our smart phones, our iPads, our Nook Books and all other devices supported by the world wide web, perhaps many of our clients also expect tree and landscape care to keep pace with these other wondrous technologies.

Recently, I encountered a challenging situation from a client of ours. Lori, who resides in southeast Michigan, was recently informed by an arborist that her large elm tree was dying from Dutch Elm Disease (DED). She was exasperated. She called the upper administration at MSU to try to find someone who could help her – Lori apparently believed she had been taken for a ride by our industry. The call filtered down to me, and I agreed to look into the issue.

The Situation

After arriving at Lori's residence, she began to unload her frustrations about landscaping and tree care. Lori related that she had been spending significant sums of money having her large elm tree injected to prevent DED for the past 15 years, just as arborists have advised. In fact, Lori had a stack of documents at least 2 inches thick confirming the landscape and tree care she had contracted for those many years. Specifically, Lori asked me why her elm was dying now after all of those treatments and what was the source of the disease? It was obvious that she was very attached to this tree. She continued to complain about a host of other issues involving her landscape and finally exclaimed that the more she spends on landscaping and tree care, the more her plants and trees seem to die. In extreme frustration she asked, "Is tree care really worth it?"

Before I committed to any response I suggested I needed to examine the tree and the situation more closely. The elm was located near her back property border on the edge of a natural area that extended through the neighborhood in both directions (Photo 1). One of Lori's primary questions was the source of DED – I pointed out a number of nearby dead elms in the natural area as the likely source (something she had failed to notice (Photo 2). Because of the onslaught of DED over the past several decades, Lori apparently believed that elms were very rare … until I showed her dozens of elm (and ash) seed-

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Photo 1: This rather large elm, which had received preventative injection treatments for Dutch Elm Disease (DED) for many years, was recently diagnosed as dying from the disease. The owner of the tree was very discouraged and felt that she had been let down by our industry. Actually, I suspected Elm Yellows (a.k.a. Phloem Necrosis and not treatable) was the real problem; this suggestion mitigated her disappointment somewhat, knowing that she had done all she could to save her tree.

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Photo 2: The homeowner of the elm tree in Photo 1 did not understand the source of DED (or Elm Yellows). The dying elms in the natural area adjacent to her property provide sufficient "disease pressure" to override many of our management techniques – the reason sanitation is so important.

Photo 3: The small dead elm (arrow) within the canopy of the large elm in Photo 1 could be the primary source of DED or Elm Yellows. Trunk injections of the large elm would not have prevented root graft transmission of either lethal disease. This small elm and other nearby elms should have been removed as part of an overall management strategy.

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ling emerging in her natural area; some of these elms were succumbing to DED. Initially not observed on first glance, I finally noticed a smaller dead "weed" elm virtually under the drip line of the canopy of her large elm; this small dead elm would undoubtedly have been the source of DED via root graft transmission (Photo 3).

Because Lori had several companies working on her property and in particular her elm over the past 10-15 years, possibly our industry did let her down in regards to the following points:

#1: No one had apparently informed Lori that sanitation (removal of undesired and/or diseased trees) was an important DED management tool.

#2: Lori apparently believed that treatment of her elm would be 100% effective. In reality, elm injection treatments do not provide a guarantee of elm survival.

#3: Lori was not informed that elm treatments do not protect trees from root graft transmission of the DED fungus. Arborists who had treated her big elm failed to notice the small dying/dead elm directly adjacent to her large tree.

The revelation of the above factors by professionals who were attending to Lori's tree(s) might have helped her become more informed about her trees and about DED in particular. I am frequently asked by the public about the best arborists in their area. As a University scientist, I do not feel it is appropriate for me to be perceived as endorsing or promoting certain companies over others. Rather, I tell consumers to become educated about particular topics of tree care important to them, and then interview potential arborist service providers to determine who is the most knowledgeable and experienced to help them (as well as visiting the MGIA website). Because there are so many people in landscaping and tree care who are not particularly qualified but who nevertheless promote themselves as professionals, it is important that the public and our prospective customers become informed, similar to other consumer activities – "buyer beware."

Tips for Ensuring Customer Satisfaction:

Following are some tips that might help minimize misunderstandings and help to promote our industry in the most professional manner.

Perform Thorough Inspections

Often we are called to a site to look at a specific problem to resolve. The public, however, often believes they have hired a professional for all their trees and landscaping needs. When I accompany professionals to sites I often find issues not recognized or observed by others, whether it is the professional arborist or the property owner (Photos 4 & 5). I am invited by arborists because they apparently believe I am quite thorough

and because I represent an unbiased, additional source for examination. I find that the public appreciates unbiased, third party observations. Some issues may not be as important as others, however, our clients further appreciate our scope of knowledge and the trust we build when we inform the public of all the various issues, particularly those that may not need treatment or are not of high priority.

Performing Services

When performing the agreed upon service(s), our employees are "under the gun" to get the job done and move on to the next account. It is prudent to educate our employees and ask them to also perform at least a quick scrutiny of other trees or plants on the property. Maladies can develop since the initial inspection and subsequent contract. In other words, we need to "stop to smell the roses."

Do Not Bad-Mouth Other Companies

Invariably during my travels, I encounter clients who relate that one company accused another company of incompetence, and so forth. Denigrating other companies only helps to destroy the reputation of our entire industry. Focus on the positives and how your company can benefit your potential client.

To Charge or Not to Charge

Many arborists tell me that they do not charge for site visits, believing they can make up their initial costs with potential contract services. Your time, fuel costs and experience are all worth something. Other than landscaping and arboriculture, very few professions offer these types of services for free. While we as consumers love free stuff, the old adage, "You get what you pay for" is also in the back of our minds. While this free inspection service may be a noble and, perhaps, wise business practice, it may also contribute to a lessening of the public's respect for our profession.

Distribute The Plant Doctors Landscape Tips

I'm biased. Over the years, I have had quite a few professionals tell me that they find my articles in the Landsculptor very helpful…so much so that many copy the articles and provide their customers with the topics that are pertinent to them. While my primary role at MSU is to discern and distribute knowledge, it is important that our entire industry distribute knowledge to the public we serve. It is also very beneficial to advise our clientele to educate themselves whether it occurs with my articles, arborist's newsletters, University publications or the web.

Is Arboriculture Worth it? You betcha!!!

For more information, please feel free to email David Roberts at robertsd@msu.edu or contact a professional plant health care provider.

Photo 4: An arborist asked me to perform a walk-through of an estate along Lake Michigan. He did not notice the browning foliage on this prominent Douglas fir "emerging from the deck." I diagnosed needle cast and Cooley Spruce Adelgid as primary problems, providing a duel benefit – the arborist can implement and charge for his procedures to correct the maladies, and the client can enjoy the benefit of healthier trees.

Photo 5: A closer examination of the foliage of the fir in Photo 4 discloses needle cast and Cooley Spruce Adelgid (fuzzy white blobs). It is always beneficial to have an extra pair or two of eyes to discover things that each of us is occasionally inclined to overlook.