The Plant Doctor's LANDSCAPE TIPS

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Photo 1: Unprofessional activities such as pruning trees too frequently or in an inappropriate manner, can lead to large, slow-healing wounds, decay and tree failure. Professional arborists know when/where/how much to prune trees for optimal tree health.

Photo 2: This oak tree contracted oak wilt when an "arborist" pruned it during the spring of 2014. In addition to inappropriate timing, the unprofessional pruning procedure consisted of spiking up the trunk with shoe irons and pruning a couple lower branches (Inset). These types of activities are all too common and degrade the reputation of the entire industry.

Photo 3: Even though the incidence of tar spot on maple declined dramatically in many locales in 2014, some of our clients may still expect perfection, an impossible achievement in biological systems.

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS AND PLANT HEALTH CARE

INTRODUCTION:

The American public possess certain perceptions about various professions. In a 2007 Harris Poll (1), the professions with the highest prestige included firefighters, scientists and educators (teachers) while some of the lowest ranked professions included even well paid positions such as brokers, actors and bankers. Police officers and engineers tended to fall in between the low- and high-ranked professions. Note that these are rankings of "Occupational Prestige," not actual public perceptions of various occupations according to honesty, morality, etc. Possibly among our own perceptions, used car salespersons, lawyers and members of the U.S. congress (around 20% approval rating) are often thought of as professions exhibiting questionable practices.

Another interesting factoid is the change in prestige of occupations over the previous quarter century (1). Those who see Teachers as having "very great prestige" have increased 25 points from 29 to 54 percent. Those who see Scientists as having "very great prestige" have dropped from 66 to 54 percent, Physicians from 61 to 52, Bankers from 17 to 10, Attorneys 36 to 22, Athletes from 26 to 16 and Entertainers from 18 to 12 percent.

Where do arborists and landscapers rank? The closest information I could find were some old data with Prestige Scores of 32 for Pest Control Occupations and 28 for occupations such as Groundskeepers and Gardeners. Perhaps these perceptions of our various occupations in the plant industry is why, in part, it is difficult to recruit new (young) people into our industry and why professionals in the plant industry feel that consumers do not respect us, at least, according to many comments I receive.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS IN PHC:

Following are some challenges our plant industry face. While not getting into the nitty gritty aspects of our profession such as proper planting techniques or right plant/right place, please allow me to pose a few general areas that seem to directly affect the general public, which is also our customer base. (I am using the general heading, Plant Health Care, to include design and installation, lawn care, irrigation, arboriculture, landscape maintenance, etc.)

The Costs of Plant Health Care: Today's American consumer is constantly looking for a better deal; complicating this desire is that estimates for tree and landscape work vary greatly, confusing many consumers. There is always some "arborist" willing to give a lower bid, even though the work performed is not often up to professional standards. As one arborist recently told me, "Tree care done correctly is not cheap." (Photos 1 & 2)

Are Customer Expectations Realistic?: In our current society where we expect immediate gratification from our ills by taking a pill, our clients also frequently expect a "Quick Fix" for their trees and other landscape problems, when in fact, these problems may have been developing over months or years. Some consumers want their landscapes to be doused with chemicals so that they will not encounter any living creeping critters in their landscape or spots on the foliage of their plants (Photo 3). Others do not want any chemical inputs but may still have low tolerance for what they consider to be abnormalities. It is highly unlikely we in the Plant Industry can provide perfect resolution of issues, especially when such diverse expectations are involved. In addition, biological systems and weather among other variables are notoriously unpredictable.

Charging for Services: Many PHC professionals are adamant about not charging for diagnostic or site visits ... while others require reimbursement for expenses. Those not charging apparently expect to offset their expenses by hopefully getting a contract. To charge or not charge is obviously a business management decision and many professionals are pleased with their management plan. However, would we respect physicians more if they didn't charge for an office visit but learned they hope to recoup their expenses by convincing us that we needed an (sometimes unnecessary) operation or by getting a kickback from a drug company for pushing a particular drug we may not need? We are about the only profession that does not routinely charge for service calls, lab/soil tests, research, etc. Professional arborists and landscapers have very high overhead costs, certification/training costs, dangerous risks in daily activities and high insurance costs.

Frequency of Service: Obviously, lawn care during the summer requires visits of at least 1-2X per week to mow the turf. However, do our consumers' lawns really need 7 or 9 applications of fertilizers and herbicides per summer season? Because of frequent visits by lawn care professionals, the public often expect similar attention from landscape maintenance providers and arborists ... often for free.

Maintenance Input Conflicts: Arborists, lawn care professionals, landscape maintenance providers and irrigation specialist rarely communicate even though they may all be servicing a particular landscape. I often hear that a company installed trees in a landscape improperly - now, I ("Joe Q. Arborist") must try to fix the problem. Hence, what one professional does may drastically affect other aspects of the same landscape and hence, the reputation of another professional (Photos 4 & 5) ... as well as the whole profession.

Degrading the Competition: In my more than 30 years association with the PHC industry, I have found that it is not uncommon for one business to degrade another business. Whether mistakes were made or not, whether incompetence is involved or not, it is probably not a good practice to complain about other competitors because it tends to result in degradation of the whole industry. When was the last time we heard of one physician complaining about another physician? It is much better to concentrate on the positive capabilities of what your company can do.

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS:

One arborist recently conveyed to me – "After 35 years as an arborist it still feels like I'm scraping at the bottom of the trades and professions." I suspect he is not alone in those thoughts. So, what can we do to elevate the entire PHC profession? Perhaps some of the following subjects may serve as starting points.

Communication: I know, I know, that therapist or marriage counselor is always suggesting better communication. However, I often find that professional plant people do not adequately communicate issues and solutions to their clients as well as they should. Conversely, many of our clients believe they know more about PHC than we do . . . a truly difficult situation.

Education: I know, I know, besides communication, the experts are always claiming that "education" is the key to everything. Not only do we need to continually educate ourselves to maintain relevance in this rapidly changing world, but we also need to let our clients know of these challenges. How can we do this? We need to educate our clients about many facets of our profession. This can be accomplished in newsletters to our clients, distribution of the Plant Doctor's Landscape Tips, and other venues. Clearly due to factors beyond our control (especially weather and the unpredictable nature of biological systems), we cannot always provide the outcomes our customers expect. Fixing a car is totally different than fixing a tree.

Tailored PHC: With ever tightening regulations regarding pesticides, fertilizers and other aspects related to our industry, we must be able to justify targeted inputs, which may not only require greater expense but which will hopefully lead to better results. As such, we will need to communicate with our clients and educate them about their specific needs as opposed to another client who may have vastly different needs.

Photo 4: Many of the trees and shrubs on this fairly new landscape are turning yellow and declining, prompting a call by the property owner to an arborist. Too much irrigation (3X daily) on this site directly adjacent to East Bay near Traverse City is leading to the leaching of soil nutrients and root rot on many of the trees and shrubs. Arborists, landscape maintenance providers and irrigation specialists need to work together to ensure an environment for optimal plant health.

Photo 5: A low bid at this large government/commercial award winning landscape site resulted in (mis)application of a deadly herbicide to mulched areas for season long weed control. Many trees and shrubs (and turf) were damaged by a company which was not aware of, or experienced with, the impacts of herbicides. A true professional would likely never have made such a blunder.

More Regulation? Many professionals in the plant industry already believe we're over-regulated, with respect to MDOT, USDOT, MDA, etc. However, there are some areas where we might benefit from additional regulation. For example, some states have adopted laws prohibiting the pruning of oaks to try to curb the spread of oak wilt. As an industry, would we also benefit from mandatory certification for arborists and landscapers given that the general public is unaware of the knowledge, experience and competency of the various so-called "professionals" with whom they come into contact?

Association Promotion: If we are to increase the reputation of our industry, we can only do so much within the realm of our individual businesses. However, in our current world, when anyone with a pickup, shovel and a chain saw can claim to be a "professional," it is especially challenging for the public to differentiate the real professionals from pseudo-professionals. It seems that further support of our industry through additional investments in our association (example, MGIA) with accompanying press releases, advertisements, etc. might provide some worthwhile long-term benefits for the professional standing of our entire industry.

The author welcomes any comments about the content of this article. He can be reached at robertsd@msu.edu or (248) 320-7124.

[1]The Harris Poll #77, August 1 (2007). "Firefighters, Scientists And Teachers Top List As Most Prestigious Occupations; According To Latest Harris Poll:Bankers, Actors And Real Estate Agents Are At The Bottom Of The List."

For more information, please feel free to email David Roberts at robertsd@msu.edu or contact a professional plant health care provider. The author, MSU and MGIA do not endorse any particular products. If using pesticides, be sure to read and follow label directions.