TREE CARE PROFESSIONALS: FAQs Part One

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Introduction:

Tree care is a daunting profession. Unlike human patients in the medical area, trees don't talk and let us know their woes. And similar to the veterinarian who administers health care to a horse or an elephant, the arborist must diagnose, treat and care for a type of biological entity that are among the largest living plant on earth.

Complicating the arborist profession is the fact that trees are often poorly understood by the public. Most people love their trees but when new homes, additions to homes, decks, commercial buildings, parking lots, etc. are planned, plant health care providers are rarely consulted until after the construction is completed and the tree is showing symptoms of decline. In addition, lawn care often takes precedence over trees. Individual homeowners or commercial concerns will spend $1000's per year on their lawns, when mowing, time, fertilization, herbicides, irrigation and other inputs are considered… and often not complain. However, if they are required to spend $10 on a 200 year old oak tree in their landscape, they feel aggrieved.

Because trees are poorly understood by the public, we in the tree car industry are often confronted with questions that at first might seem inane or ridiculous. However, as with any profession requiring extensive knowledge and skills, these questions afford us an opportunity to educate and disseminate information about our profession and tree care. Following are some frequently asked questions (FAQs) I have received over the years. My answers may be different than other professionals, but they all may be valid responses.

FAQ #1: My lawn isn't doing well under my tree. What should I do?

Answer: Get rid of the lawn…at least under the tree. Seriously, lawns and trees are often in a competitive struggle for survival. Lawns require different cultural inputs than trees. Lawns compete with trees for fertilizer nutrients and water. And that broadleaf weed killer applied to lawns views trees as nothing but overgrown dandelions. Trees often lose the battle (Photos 1 & 2) because lawns are often given priority while trees, like Rodney Dangerfield, "don't get no respect".

FAQ #2: Is my tree dying of old age?

Answer: Most trees, particularly in the urban environment, do not die of old age. Yet, "Old Age" is one of the most frequent excuses given as rationale for declining trees (Photos 1 & 2). In our highly maintained landscapes, human activities create stresses on trees that predispose them to all kinds of insect attacks, diseases, cultural and environmental problems. Does that 30 year old tree have a wire basket that is strangling its roots and trunk? Was it planted in a confined, poorly drained area? Did many of the branches succumb to winter injury as a result of substandard growth last season?

Photo 1: This tree, known as the Century Oak, is much older than 100 years. It eventually succumbed to death, not because of old age but because of decades of abuse from construction, lawn care practices, improper pruning, excess irrigation, compaction and a variety of other detrimental factors. The author stands next to the trunk (Inset).

Photo 2: This oak tree, almost as old as the one in Photo 1, was protected during the construction of the building several years ago. Instead of a lawn, a mulched area simulating as much as possible a natural forest area is maintained within the drip line of the tree. The tree shows no sign of decline.

FAQ #3: Because I water and fertilize my lawn, I shouldn't have to water and fertilize my tree, should I?

In landscapes with automatic irrigation systems, lawns are often overwatered. Also, highly maintained turf often receives too much fertilizer. And, lawn herbicides are detrimental to most other broad leaf plants in the landscape. Some of this water, fertilizer and herbicide may leach into the root zones of trees. Often however, the inputs for lawns are unfavorable for tree health (Photo 3). Because trees have different require-

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Photo 3: Highly maintained lawns are often detrimental not only to lawns themselves but also to trees. This lawn receives 30 minutes of irrigation per day whether it is raining or not. A number of trees are leaning and uprooting (inset) due to poor root system development as a result of excess moisture.

ments for their optimal health, it is important that the soil environment around trees be tested periodically for nutrition and moisture levels. We as professional arborists can assist with fine tuning conditions for optimal tree health.

FAQ #4: Why are so many branches on my tree dying?

As trees age and mature, it is quite common for inner and lower branches to die. Usually, these branches die to a natural thinning process and shading. There is generally no cause for alarm when this happens. These should be pruned from the tree because natural pruning is sometimes not effective (Photo 4). There is a cause for concern when upper and outer branches of trees die. This could be a sign of a more serious problem which should be accurately diagnosed before any corrective measures are implemented. Decline is a term often applied to trees that gradually die back, especially in urban environments.

Photo 4: Older trees usually exhibit many stressed or dead lower/inner branches. Shading effects and natural thinning are usually responsible for this natural phenomenon. In this particular case natural pruning was not effective because callusing could not be completed; professional pruning would be desirable.

FAQ #5: My tree died after the company I hired sprayed it. Should I contact my attorney?

Answer: Only if you need to spend more money. Only in very rare situations are trees harmed by chemicals that are sprayed on them. If leaf damage occurs from "phytotoxicity", again a very rare event, the trees will usually recover. Often, our clients notice problems with their trees *after* they receive a bill for a professional service (Photo 5). Sometimes, the treatment was not as effective as hoped, such as is often the case with scab on crabapple or Diplodia tip blight on pines.

Photo 5:: The owner of this old apple tree claimed that the company that sprayed this tree killed it. First, approximately two-thirds of the tree has green leaves on it. The third portion of the tree that died was due to years and years of fire blight, scab, and fungal canker issues on an old declining tree. Better tree care would have prevented this decline.

FAQ #6: Why do the leaves on my tree appeared deformed?

Answer: Leaves may be deformed for a variety of reasons. Insects and diseases can cause leaves to appear abnormal. Frost and other harsh weather conditions can affect the foliage of our plants. One of the more common causes of leaf deformation is herbicide application. Sometimes broadleaf weed controls applied to lawns are picked up by the roots of trees; these herbicides in low doses may not kill the tree but may simply deform the foliage. In other situations, our clients unknowingly apply chemicals incorrectly (Photo 6).

Photo 6: Homeowners sometimes do not understand the chemicals they use. In this case, Roundup Extended Care was applied to a mulched walkway beneath this dogwood for long term weed suppression. Unfortunately, tree roots picked up the herbicide, causing leaf deformation. The tree is expected to survive.

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FAQ#7: My trees died when they lost their leaves by August, and I need to have them cut down. What trees should I plant to replace them?

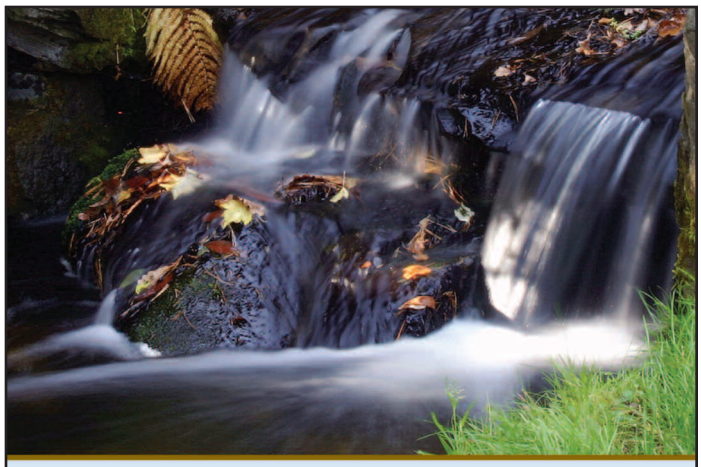
Answer: Hold on and chill out-your trees may not be dead. Various species of trees are susceptible to specific foliar problems such as scab on crabapple, tar spot on maple and anthracnose on various trees and shrubs (Photo 7). Generally, leaf loss by various diseases, insects or traumas is not lethal to trees. Trees will re-foliate next season just fine. If the problem is accurately diagnosed, various tree care practices can be implemented next season that may help to correct the problem. Often, however, trees may exhibit defoliation year after year without serious life threatening consequences.

Photo 7: Many clients mistake defoliated trees as dead trees when, in fact, such defoliation is due to nonlethal problems such as tar spot, apple scab, anthracnose, drought and other traumas. Regrettably, many of these misdiagnosed trees are removed unnecessarily every year.

FAQ #8: My pine is dying! What can be done!?

Answer: Discoloration and loss of older, inner foliage (needles) is an all natural phenomenon that occurs every year, particularly in the late summer and fall seasons (Photo 8). As conifers grow, they produce a new crop of needles every year; typically, "evergreen" conifers retain two to four years worth of foliage. Various stresses and environmental conditions can exacerbate the sometimes startling symptoms of natural senescence and incite panic among the unknowing public.

Photo 8: Many people become alarmed when any needles on their evergreens become yellow or brown. The yellowing of the older, inner needles on this Scotts pine is an all-natural senescence. Yet, tree professionals receive panic calls every fall.



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