The Tree Doctor's Diary

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DR. DAVID L. ROBERTS
THE PLANT DOCTOR, LLC

"The Tree Doctor"
Michigan State University (retired)

Dr. Roberts retired from Michigan State University in 2018 after committing four decades to advancing MSU's Land Grant Mission, originally signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln during the midst of the American Civil War. He has published hundreds of articles and has taught hundreds of lectures and workshops.

Dr. Roberts has researched many issues in Michigan's plant industry, including Oak Wilt, Dutch Elm Disease, Diplodia Tip Blight of Pines, along with a variety of cultural problems such as plant nutrition and herbicide toxicity. During his career, he has discovered a variety of new diseases and pests such as Phomopsis Canker of Spruce and the first bacterial wilt disease of turfgrasses in North America.

In the early 2000s, his research on Ash Decline in Southeast Michigan led to the discovery of the invasive Emerald Ash Borer in North America.

In his retirement, Dr. Roberts intends to remain active with the Arboriculture/Landscape/Nursery industries. Dr. Roberts is President, CEO and CBW (Chief Bottle Washer) of The Plant Doctor, LLC…aka The Tree Doctor.

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My First Year in the Business World

INTRODUCTION

A little more than a year has passed since my retirement from Michigan State University in October 2018. I started The Plant Doctor, LLC business with a two-fold intent: 1) reserve the business name under the same moniker I was known during my four decades at MSU, and 2) stay somewhat active with and connected to the plant industry after I had retired. It's not as though I needed something to do; I have plenty of hobbies to occupy my time. But I have truly developed a passion for helping people, both professional and laypeople, with their plant issues. Over the past four decades, I believe I garnered a realistic appreciation of our challenges due to my close, even daily, interaction with my colleagues in the nursery, landscape and arboriculture industries. However, I thought it might be interesting to share a few of my experiences in the "Real World of Business", now isolated from "Ivory-Towered Academia", from whence I came…although I have always considered myself a pragmatist in touch with both academia and the real world.

The following examples represent some of my honest to goodness experiences I've encountered since my retirement. I fully understand that these examples are not that unusual for many of the readers of *The Michigan Landscape*, but perhaps upon vicariously sharing my experiences, my friends and colleagues in the industry might be able to offer some words of wisdom on how to proceed into my future in my "second career". Please note that with respect to the following examples, the names and/or locations have been changed to protect the innocent, … and sometimes the guilty.

Larry – "Are You Sure You're Charging Enough?"

Larry, who lives near Brighton, Michigan, contacted me at the recommendation of his arborist because his arborist wasn't quite sure what was causing the branch dieback on his Norway maple (Photo 1A). Larry and his wife considered their tree a prized possession, and I must admit that their Norway maple was probably the largest specimen that I had ever run across (Photo 1B). After examining the tree for some time, including cutting a branch off and sectioning it to look for Verticillium Wilt staining among other maladies, I arrived at the conclusion that the causal problem was Valsa Canker; I coined the term "Norway Maple Dieback" a number of years ago. This disease will be the subject of an upcoming article. Having spent more than an hour at the site diagnosing the problem and answering a plethora of questions from the concerned homeowners who bought this home specifically because of this extraordinarily large tree, Larry asked, "How much do I owe you?" I suggested a dollar amount that included mileage and a modest consultation fee…to which Larry immediately responded, "Are you sure you're charging enough?" Larry is associated with the legal profession and apparently believed that someone with all of my degrees and experience should be charging a "professional fee" more reflective of my credentials. Larry's reaction has been rare in my first year of private practice, where people often expect knowledge and information to be free or for very little cost; they don't seem to mind paying for services such as mowing/fertilizing/weed control of a lawn or treatments to correct a tree disease, but many clients believe an ***accurate diagnosis*** from an expert with many years of experience should be pro bono. Lillian in the next example is a more common reaction to my needing to charge for my "diagnostic and advisory" services.

Lillian – "But I'm 80 Years Old"

Lillian who lives in western Michigan contacted me because she had several dying trees and declining plants in her landscape. When her arborist couldn't determine the cause(s) of her plant problem(s), he advised Lillian to call "Dr. Roberts". "He'll know what the problem is." During my phone conversation with Lillian, she described the symptoms on several of her trees, vines and perennials; based on her descriptions, her plants indeed seemed to be declining and dying. However, I was perplexed by her descriptions of the issue over such a broad range of afflicted plants. She pleaded with me to come to her home to diagnose the problems "before all of my plants are dead." I love challenges so I replied that I would be happy to visit her home but realizing that I now must try to make a modest living after retirement, I related that I would need to charge mileage and a modest consultation fee for my visit. Lillian quickly replied, "But I'm 80 years old." As our conversation continued her voice begin to quiver and soften in volume in a painful, stressful sort of manner. I began to feel remorseful as she related her "fixed income" and implications that she was practically destitute. I disclosed my retirement and how I

1A As with many areas in Michigan during the spring and early summer of 2019, Norway maple suffered from a branch by branch dieback, which I termed "Valsa Canker" a number of years ago.

1B The afflicted tree in Photo 1A is likely the largest Norway maple I have ever encountered.

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couldn't provide a pro bono service as I often did on behalf of MSU. Again, she said, "But I'm 80 years old," as her voice became weaker and even more raspy. I began to wonder if the stress of her declining plants and her impoverished status meant she was starting to faint or have a heart problem, or, God forbid, could the end be near? I tried to ask her for her address so that, if need be, I could call 911 but realized by this time that she was likely beyond help, at least from my end...measured by her struggle to speak into her phone. Silently, I began to wonder if 911 paramedics could locate her phone by GPS. I'm a sucker for "older people" even though by many people's standards, I'm now associated with the AARP crowd. I was a little reluctant to relent to her pleadings for a free visit due to that little nagging voice in the back of my head that reminded me of similar experiences in the past. How can I run a business if I am to succumb to the possibility of being preyed upon as an ignorant person? Please do not misconstrue my thoughts. When it comes to the elderly, I have the deepest respect and love for former generations who helped make this country great and who have so many experiences to share and from which we can all benefit. I open doors for the elderly, carry their groceries, sometimes repair problems in their homes and 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 arrived at a price that wasn't much more than "coffee money". I relented from my original consultation fee, hoping she would be spared from further stress of this "costly" endeavor.

Arriving at Lillian's home several days later, I realized she had a much nicer home than I had anticipated (Photo 2), with a manicured landscape to boot! I spied her Mercedes as I walked by her garage, immediately comparing it to my 22-year-old "rusty but trusty" Jeep Cherokee with 240,000 miles. I thought, "What had I gotten myself into?" Lillian soon emerged exhibiting a very confident stride, not the infirmed person I expected to meet; she appeared very fit and didn't look a day over 65, if that, and definitely not near the "80-year-old" as she had portrayed herself. Furthermore, she must have gotten over her cold, laryngitis, heart condition or whatever prepossessed her because her voice possessed no evidence of the raspy, withering condition I had heard during our phone call. I thought "My Gosh!, if she is 80 years old, I can only hope I can be in such great shape when I attain that age!"

As she guided me towards her sick plants, her personal gardener joined us…yup, that's right, her personal gardener. Lillian took me to her first group of sickly, "dwarf" prized lilacs in her garden beds (Photos 3A & 3B). I immediately recognized the telltale symptoms of herbicide injury. I wasn't sure how to proceed with such a quick diagnosis because this was way too easy. Abruptly, she asked if I knew what was wrong. I hemmed and hawed a bit and related that I had some theories but would like to see some of her other afflicted plants to determine if there was a pattern. Next, she took me to her climbing hydrangea on the gate to one of her gardens. Her climbing hydrangea showed similar leaf distortions and restricted growth as I had observed on her lilacs (Photos 4A & 4B), essentially confirming what I already suspected as the cause of her plant problems. Again, she queried me if I knew what was wrong with her plants. I responded that I was "fairly certain"; however, I needed to ask her some questions first to verify my suspicions. I asked her if she used herbicides. Gloriously, she answered, "Yes." The most common answer I receive to this query is, "Nope, never use them." People often claim they do not use herbicides, so her honest answer was a great confirmation of my suspicions. I also wanted to see her herbicide containers, knowing people often respond, "I never use anything toxic to plants." Yeah, right. I followed her to her garage where she kept her herbicides (Photo 5). I now had the difficult task of trying to convince her that the *Imazapyr* component in her Roundup® 365 and Ortho® GroundClear® caused all of her plant problems she had shown me. She glared at me and sputtered out, "How could you figure it out so fast?" I stared her down, prepared for her next comment, which luckily never came. I expected her to say that because I had solved the puzzle so quickly, I should charge her even less than the "coffee money" we had agreed to over the phone. If necessary, I was already prepared with my rebuttal, "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/her patients on the operating table?"

Lee – "A Man of your Caliber"

I was emailed by a homeowner who claimed that he and his wife enjoyed reading my articles. Imagine that…someone reading my articles! It was all the more remarkable because they were not associated with our industry; I honestly didn't know that some ordinary Michiganders from other walks of life actually subscribe to *The Michigan Landscape*. Perhaps their interest in *The Michigan Landscape* was due to the fact that Dorothy, Lee's lovely wife, had a first-class greenhouse and probably the most

extensive orchid collection I had ever seen. Lee related that he lived northwest of Lansing 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 then I'd make every effort to schedule an appointment to visit his home. In his reminder email he wrote,

> *"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*

Who could resist the enticement of a free Klondike bar? I haven't had one in years! Since retiring from MSU, one of my most difficult challenges in my new business, The Plant Doctor, LLC, is how to broach the subject of a fee for my service. Did Lee believe I still worked for MSU and that I often made free house calls? Was that the reason for the enticement of a Klondike bar or were Lee and Dorothy simply trying to be extraordinary sociable hosts? Because Lee and Dorothy were located approximately 35 miles from my home (office), I politely but nervously asked him in my email response if he would mind paying mileage and a modest consultation fee. Here was his reply.

> *"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*

Wow, what a nice reply! If I disclosed what Lee did for a living, many of you would not only recognize his name, but you would also understand why he writes so eloquently. Upon my arrival at Lee and Dorothy's home, I was chauffeured around the property by Dorothy in their John Deere Gator. Do you think I'd be too greedy to ask for a Klondike bar **and** a soft drink?

Grosse Pointe "Effluence"

Deborah contacted me from her home in Grosse Pointe, which is generally considered an affluent area. She asked if I was for hire to perform a consultation. I replied that I probably could, depending on her needs. Deborah's next question was, "What would you charge?" I related that I would need to charge mileage from my home and a modest consultation fee. Subsequently, she then asked if I could treat her trees and trim them as part of the package. 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 responded that she may as well hire an arborist. I said, "Ma'am, that's your choice." Then, she had the audacity to ask me for some recommendations of qualified arborists! Oh well, win some, lose some.

Arborist in Small Claims Court

John, an arborist with whom I have sporadically interacted with over the years and who occasionally converses with me about old cars, called to relate a serious dilemma in which he found himself. Apparently, when a straight-line wind snapped off a honeylocust tree 15-20 feet up its trunk, the tree's elderly owners were panic-stricken and pleaded with John to promptly remove the tree because the tree blocked their egress from their home through the front door. John, in his professional sense of responsibility, sidelined his regular clients to help the couple who seemed to be partially stranded in their home by the structurally compromised honeylocust tree. When felling the still standing section of the couple's locust trunk, the trunk accidently broke a small branch from a nearby, still-standing honeylocust tree. Acknowledging this error by his crew, John performed additional services free of charge to hopefully placate the homeowners, who agreed to the terms. Upon completion of his services, John requested payment according to their written and verbal agreement. The elderly couple claimed that the broken branch caused a lopsided tree in their front yard (Photo 6). Apparently, the elderly couple saw an opportunity to renege on much of the bill and offered only $900 of the total $1,800 of charges. Moreover, within 24 hours, the homeowners withdrew the $900 offer and filed a small claims court suit, wherein they claimed $6,000 in damages. John was now faced with being at least $7,800 deficient in his business from this single incident, after trying to do a good deed. In such a pickle, John asked me to visit the site and write an impartial report. In my report, I noted that while the still-standing tree was indeed lopsided, the uneven appearance of the tree was due to crowding over many years from the other (failed) honeylocusts, among other documented observations (such as decay in the injured branch, etc.). During the court proceedings, two experts hired by the elderly couple claimed that the injury to the still-standing tree caused by the felled trunk caused the still-standing honeylocust to become lopsided and dangerous. In addition, they claimed that the tree needed to be removed, which if necessary, would incur even more expenses for John. After completion of arguments by the plaintiffs (the elderly couple), the judge then asked John for his view of the issue. According to John's excited

revelations during a phone call immediately following the hearing, John produced my report for the judge's review and explained what had actually happened (from John's point of view). The judge examined my report and exclaimed, "I know Dr. Roberts." The judge then asked the elderly homeowners if they had seen Dr. Roberts' report. They replied, "No." The judge then asked them if they wanted to read Dr. Roberts' report. They said, "No." The judge read the "Conclusions" of my report to the court, stood up, and said, "Case dismissed."

Oak Wilt

Every year, I receive numerous questions about Oak Wilt, usually beginning in mid to late July. Following are a couple of examples.

In June, Daniel pruned one branch from one of his oak trees to provide better clearance for mowing his lawn (Photo 7A). Unfortunately, the pruned oak (Photo 7B) contracted Oak Wilt from overland transmission of the Oak Wilt fungus by sap beetles. Daniel, a rather young man, was quite technologically advanced, compared to some of us in older generations.

2 Lillian, who claimed, "But I'm 80 years old", was not as destitute as she portrayed over the phone in her attempt to get a reduced fee rate or free service from me.

3A &B Lillian's three lilacs exhibited differential symptoms (3B) of Imazapyr toxicity from her spot treatments with her arsenal of herbicides (Roundup® 365 and Ortho® GroundClear®). I predicted that all three lilacs were likely to recover but that she must be patient for a year or so.

4A &B Lilian's climbing hydrangea also exhibited differential symptoms (4B) of Imazapyr toxicity, depending on where she "zapped" specific weeds in her brick pavers.

5 The two products responsible for Lillian's tree and landscape plant problems were Roundup® 365 and Ortho® GroundClear®. both contain the deadly Imazapyr. Luckily, her spot treatment in lieu of broadcast spray of her pavers was an insufficient exposure to kill most of her trees and plants in her beds.

6 According to the plaintiffs in small claims court, the honeylocust on the right indeed appeared lopsided, not from a small broken branch but from years of competition from the adjacent honeylocust, which failed structurally during a straight-line wind and which had to be removed.

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He had visited the World Wide Web and determined that he had Oak Wilt after the leaves started raining down from his pruned oak tree about a month later. Luckily, Daniel's prompt diagnosis and response of asking for assistance made it fairly easy at this stage of infection to remediate the Oak Wilt at his landscape site.

Another property owner from northern Michigan informed me that five of her oak trees contracted Oak Wilt when some "arborists" were removing a dead ash, and during the felling process accidently injured some branches on her nearby oaks. Interestingly, the homeowner had asked the arborists if they would prune her oak trees while they were on site. The arborists insisted they could not prune (injure) her oaks at that time of year due to Oak Wilt! Moral of the Story: never injure oaks regardless of mode of injury (pruning or tree felling) 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 unfortunately passed away several years previously, asked me to visit and examine her landscape. Apparently, she had become overwhelmed with all of the maintenance duties her husband used to perform. Linda claimed to read all of my articles with interest. What!? Someone else reads my articles?!?! Among the advice she requested for her trees, she also asked me how to "get rid of" a weed in her flower bed (Photo 8). I suggested she try occasional applications of glyphosate or similar broad-spectrum herbicide. She indicated that she feared glyphosate and chemicals in general because of all of the attention to cancer advertisements by attorneys on TV. She expressed a desire to be as organic as possible. With that in mind, I asked her if she had ever tried physical removal. "Yes, but it keeps coming back." She related that she even tried vinegar and some other home-style remedies to no avail. Now, I'm in somewhat of a quandary if Linda doesn't want to use traditional chemical herbicides and has failed with "organic" methods. I kicked some soil while I thought about her dilemma, which has now become mine. I asked her what plans she has for this flower bed. After some thinking (and kicking of soil), she replied that she really didn't have any plans for this area. Viola! The most logical solution suddenly disclosed itself. At the risk of angering lawn care professionals and professional landscapers, I exclaimed, "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." Somewhat perplexed, she thought about it for about a minute (and kicked some more soil) and then seemed genuinely relieved that she didn't have to comply with everyone else's definition of a "weed" and the expectation for a pristine landscape. Linda's "weed" problem was resolved efficiently and organically!!!

Along this same line, I recently saw an advertisement that Ortho® GroundClear® will control Ground Ivy (Photo 9, aka Creeping Charlie). This broad-spectrum herbicide containing glyphosate and imazapyr might very well control Ground Ivy, but because Ground Ivy usually grows very competitively in shaded areas beneath trees, this product will very likely "control" trees as well.

What's This?

I have received quite a few text and email queries **daily** while serving our industry as The Tree Doctor (aka The Plant Doctor), before and after retirement. Here are a few examples that I received during my first year after retirement.

What's This? (Photo 10): My initial reply was going to be smart-alecky, "I think it's a tree." When people send me photos without information or their questions regarding the photo, it becomes a stressful burden for me to try to drag out of them what their concern is or why they are contacting me. Now, I have to ask a series of questions through my responses via texts or emails and such follow-up becomes extremely time consuming, especially since I haven't charged for remote contact, and inquirers never offer to pay for such queries. In such circumstances, I am often slow to respond if I must put forth a lot of effort to coax the information out of the inquirer. In some instances, I forget to respond because I am simply too busy.

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What's This? (Photo 11): The insect appears to be a Longhorned Beetle, perhaps the Pine Sawyer Beetle if it was found on a conifer. Thank goodness, it does not appear to be the repugnant Asian Longhorned Beetle, about which we are all gravely concerned.

What's This? (Photo 12): An arborist texted me this photo and asked what the problem was, further saying he had never seen it before. I replied that it appears to be galls formed by the Cynipid Wasp Gall (aka Jumping Oak Gall) on White oak; I explained that I had published an article on this pest several years back. Several minutes later the arborist texted, "Found It!." The arborist disclosed that his daughter catalogues all of my articles by topic and by date, the reason she could locate it so fast. Wow! Another person who reads my articles!

What's This? (Photo 13): An arborist texted me this photo and asked if this gall was formed by an insect. Based on its appearance, I immediately determined that the gall was known as Western Gall Rust (not Eastern Gall Rust), a fungal-incited rust disease, and that it only occurs on Scots pine.

What's This? (Photo 14): It appears to be "Plant Lice" (aka Bark Lice or aphids) to me.

Boxwood Blight Not!

A very common question this past year included concerns about Boxwood Blight, a serious, introduced fungal disease. Although Boxwood Blight was inadvertently brought into Michigan on some nursery stock, the disease has not become a major threat at this time but could be in the near future if it becomes established here. Because of the prodigious publicity about Boxwood Blight, many people have wisely become quite paranoid. In most cases of sickly boxwoods that I looked at this year, the predominant issues were caused by deicing salts and winter injury (Photo 15). In many cases, the stem tissue and buds exhibited viability, indicating that the shrubs had the potential for recovery.

Conclusions

It has been a very interesting but challenging year in my retirement from academia to the business world. During my first year in retirement, I realized that I could continue to make some valuable contributions to this great industry of ours. Perhaps my greatest challenge was knowing what to charge "clients" for my efforts. As a member of the AARP crowd, like Lillian, I love "free stuff" such as free coffee and the Senior discounts whenever I can get them. I don't expect to earn a living from my efforts but simply to earn a little extra spending money. In my goal to stay active in the Green Industry, I love answering phone calls and responding to texts and email messages in my lifelong pursuit of helping people with their plant problems as "The Plant Doctor" or "The Tree Doctor". However, my efforts do take considerable time and investment (smart phone, computer, travel, time commitment, etc.). If any of you have any advice to offer, I would sure appreciate it. During the past year, I did not advertise, nor did I print business cards. And I did little to develop my website, where I hope to eventually post hundreds of my articles. During the past year, I received many questions concerning access to my articles and other information, which were previously posted on my now defunct MSU website. I'll make these deficiencies my goals for next year - my New Year's Eve resolution. Even with these glaring deficiencies in my attention to my business accoutrements, I was plenty busy and look forward to working with the Green Industry in the coming year.

7A &B Daniel, who never had heard of Oak Wilt before, pruned one limb from one of his oaks in May (Photo 7A) to provide better clearance while mowing his lawn. Within a month or so, leaves began cascading down, symptoms that were very typical of an Oak Wilt infection (Photo 7B). Lab tests confirmed the lethal disease.

8 Linda was concerned about this weed that had taken over her flower bed, as well as the chemicals that would be needed to eradicate it. After some discussion, we concluded that it might be best to leave it, even propagate it, if she wasn't all that interested in having a pristine landscape to "keep up with the Joneses".

9 While lawncare professionals and many homeowners consider Ground Ivy (Creeping Charlie) a "weed", it grows just fine where turf is not likely to grow so well, due to shading. The "weed" even tolerates some mowing.

15 Boxwood Blight is considered a serious threat to one of our industry's leading foundation plants. However, most problems seen on boxwoods in 2019 resulted from deicing salt injury and winter injury.