



The Tree Doctor's Diary Another Year in the Real World

INTRODUCTION:

Another year has passed in my retirement and, in many ways, it's been a tough year because of COVID spikes and lockdowns and all. I'm still getting the Tree Doctor's World Headquarters in shape so I can better serve the citizens and arborists of Michigan. I thought it might be interesting to publish an update in *The Tree Doctor's Diary* series, which I expect will soon attract enough attention that I could receive a call any day to begin shooting on a season for Netflix.

DA Wants Free Service: A District Attorney for a county that shall remain anonymous phoned me and declared I came strongly recommended as The Great Tree Pooh Bah by arborists in her area. She proceeded to tell me that she wanted my help with her tree problems, which seemed to be dire according to her description (Photo 1). I related that I would be glad to help her out, but I would need to charge mileage and a modest consultation fee. While talking to her, I estimated that I would need to charge somewhere in the neighborhood of \$90-100 (IRS rate) for mileage. Before I even finished my sentence she blurted out, “Can’t you come out for free?!?” I replied that I’m retired from Michigan State University and that I need to be able to cover my expenses. “Well,” she said, “Ace Can’t Hardly Tree Service (name made up) will come out for free.” I told her that some companies offer a free visit/diagnostic service with hopes that they can recoup their costs by getting your business. I asked her why she didn’t have Ace Can’t Hardly Tree Service come out. She replied that everyone she contacted

said I was the best. Finally, getting a little peeved with the discussion, I asked her if she does her job pro bono. That question seemed to shock her into reality. She apologized profusely and offered to pay for my time on the phone call. I declined to accept such a payment. So, I advised her to seek help from her local companies and if she wasn’t satisfied, I would be happy to make a site visit, for a fee, of course.

Dan’s Cherry: Dan is restoring an old schoolhouse, a gorgeous old building with its school bell still in the tower (Photo 2A). He is very devoted to the property, which is the reason he asked me to examine the landscape and make any recommendations for maintenance of the plants, especially the trees. In the front of the property are two rather large, old cherry trees that Dan wants to make sure are maintained in good health as stellar landmarks for his property, perhaps

believing they are part of the historical significance for the old schoolhouse. Surprisingly, the trees were in excellent condition considering their age and prior lack of maintenance inputs. I usually find these trees to be relatively short-lived (compared to other species) and susceptible to maladies such as cherry leaf spot and peach tree borer, etc. As we toured the property and looked at other trees, Dan expressed concern for another

P1 This could be the home of the District Attorney who wanted charity from the Tree Doctor on the destitute side of town,...NOT!

P2A & 2B Dan is restoring this old schoolhouse that still has the bell in its bell tower. He takes pride in his landscape where two older cherry trees are prominent landmarks in front. These trees must be beautiful in the spring when they are flowering. Dan asked why this other cherry in his landscape appeared to be declining (Photo 2B). I had to break the news that it was in fact not a cherry tree, but a crabapple afflicted with the defoliating but non-lethal “Scab” Disease.



BY DR. DAVID L. ROBERTS
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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.

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2A



2B

cherry tree that appeared to be dying (Photo 2B). I explained that the tree was a *Malus* (crabapple), not a cherry, and that the tree was afflicted by the non-lethal fungal disease known as scab. I informed Dan that he could have his crabapple tree treated for scab the following spring but that his cherry and crabapple trees will bloom just fine in the spring, barring weather complications.

Sandy's Cherry: I was visiting my dear friend Sandy for Happy Hour one day, and she asked me if I'd tell her why her cherry tree died before she had it cut down and replaced with a new one. After examining the tree, which appeared far more devoid

of foliage than Dan's "Cherry" (Photo 2B), I told her that I had good news and bad news - which did she want first? She wanted the good news first. So, I told her that her cherry tree was not dead. She then asked for the bad news. I related that the tree was a crabapple and not a cherry. She wasn't quite buying my diagnosis/identification. Our ensuing conversation...

Sandy: *"But, it gets cherries on it every year."*

Dr. Dave: *"When does it produce cherries?"*

Sandy: *"Every fall."*

Dr. Dave: *"When is the Traverse City Cherry Festival?"*

Sandy: *"Early July."*

My last question and her answer seemed to startle Sandy, that I seemed to know what I was talking about and that my tree identification was correct. I suggested that she not remove the tree and that the tree would likely appear very healthy the following spring. Again, as with Dan, I suggested she could have the tree treated in the spring to maintain healthy foliage into the fall rather than let the tree suffer from premature defoliation in the summer, but that the disease would never kill the tree. The following spring the tree flowered and leafed out just beautifully (Photo 3). Sandy was so elated she had not destroyed her tree and replaced it with a new seedling.

Over the years, I have often wondered how many trees are needlessly destroyed due to misdiagnoses of non-lethal diseases (or pests) as lethal problems, the reason why I often emphasize the importance of accurate diagnosis and understanding of maladies in my publications and programs. In Sandy's and Dan's cases, the Tree Doctor's recommendations saved two more trees from euthanasia.

Dennis' Spruce Decline & Trellis Rust on Pear: Dennis contacted me to assist him with his spruce trees on his property near Fenton, Michigan. When I arrived, he promptly led me to his declining spruce trees, lamenting the fact he had been paying a company to treat his trees for the



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past five years; yet, his trees continued to decline (Photo 4). He was beside himself in divulging all of the money he had invested in the trees. He also said that he had confronted the company about his dissatisfaction with their service. The company responded that they are “following the instructions of Dr. Roberts”. Now that really put me on the spot! I diagnosed the problem as a clear case of (*Rhizosphaera*) needle cast disease (Photo 4 Inset). Then I asked if he knew what they were applying and when? He presented the work order which specified three applications of “fungicide”, one application each in June, July, and August. I related that, for *Rhizosphaera* needle cast, the prime time for treatment was slightly off. The three treatments should be applied in the spring, beginning at budbreak. Case closed,... hopefully. While there, I noticed that Trellis Rust, which is so common in Southeast Michigan, had infected one of his fruit-bearing pears (Photo 5).

Controlling Weeds in Crown Vetch: Crown Vetch is a wonderful groundcover for many environments. It tolerates drought, it is very competitive, it controls erosion on slopes, and when it is flowering

it is absolutely stunning. Unfortunately, an occasional weed pops up through the masses of stolons/stems. Grasses can be troublesome invaders of Crown Vetch. Fortunately, we have some herbicides that can be utilized to control grasses in Crown Vetch. Broadleaf weeds might be more difficult to manage in a “broadleaf groundcover”. When the contractors decided they needed to control the weeds at one location, they reached for the wrong herbicide. Trimec 992 was used on this hillside, and the Crown Vetch was turned into straw (Photo 6A & Photo 6B). On the front of the Trimec 992 Container (Photo 6A Inset) are listed some of the weeds controlled by the herbicide. One is “clover”, a leguminous relative of Crown Vetch.

Oak Wilt,... Not! Tony owned a very nice lake front property in Bloomfield Hills. He became panic-stricken when a large red oak turned brown (Photo 7). He knew about Oak Wilt and was very

concerned about all of the other oaks on his and nearby properties. He called his top-notch arborist who called me to investigate the situation. Although the tree



P3 My friend Sandy believed her Cherry Tree had died and asked me to diagnose the problem before she replaced it with a new tree. Her tree appeared far more defoliated than Dan’s “Cherry” (Photo 2B). Sandy did not initially believe my identification and diagnosis as “Scab” on crabapple but was nevertheless convinced and elated when her “Cherry’s” flowers and foliage emerged the following spring.

P4 Dennis was stressed out that he had invested a lot of money in his spruce trees over the years; they still were losing more needles than he liked (Inset). The timing of the applications of fungicides for control of *Rhizosphaera* needle cast was slightly off and needed to be adjusted to spring rather than summer.

P5 While examining Dennis’ landscape, I noticed that his fruit-bearing pears had Trellis Rust, not realizing that the disease had made its way out from Southeast Michigan (Metro Detroit) as far as Holly, Michigan.

P6A & 6B A landscape maintenance company made a serious error when they applied Trimec 992 (Inset) to a steep slope to control weeds in the groundcover Crown Vetch. This herbicide did a nice job of controlling broadleaf weeds and Crown Vetch but left the invasive weed grasses intact. The application area line of demarcation is obvious (Photo 6B).

P7 Tony was elated to hear my diagnosis that his browning oak tree probably didn’t have Oak Wilt. A slurry of cement sludge was washing daily to the base of his oak tree (Inset) from the neighbor’s construction of a new Mega Mansion.





had turned completely brown, there was something about the symptomatology that just didn't quite fit for Oak Wilt. Further study of the situation revealed a slurry of concrete effluent puddling around the base of the tree (Photo 7 Inset). This cement sludge was flowing down a steep hill almost daily from construction of a new Mega Mansion nextdoor. I didn't believe the cause of the tree browning/death was due to Oak Wilt, so, I advised the arborist to collect a sample and have it tested for Oak Wilt at a lab. The sample tested negative for Oak Wilt. Even though he had lost one of his large oak trees, Tony was so elated with the results that he texted and phoned me several times to thank me. Tony knew about Oak Wilt and that he would have to commit many \$1000s and sacrifice many healthy oak trees if he actually had Oak Wilt. It's always wise for arborists/landscapers and property owners to get second and third opinions for serious issues like Oak Wilt.

Herbicide Denial, Denial: I was contacted by a Northville property owner who claimed he had a serious problem with his landscape (Photo 8). While examining his trees and assorted plants, I determined that the cause of his tree decline and death was herbicide injury, likely Imazapyr. I asked to see his garage where he kept his chemicals; he had three containers of Roundup® in the white bottles. He said he had used Roundup® for years and never had a problem; he didn't believe my diagnosis. I asked if he, by chance, used a different formulation the previous year. He denied several times he had used anything other than Roundup®. I proceeded to explain that there are different formulations of Roundup® with different chemicals. Based on the stunted growth of many woody plants, I concluded that he had likely applied a formulation containing Imazapyr the previous year; Imazapyr symptoms frequently do not develop until the year after application.

The Blue Tarp Poison Ivy Eradication Technique: I visited an older lake community way down in the corner of Southwest Michigan to perform a tree health inspection for the community. It was an absolutely lovely experience because the residents there, who have passed their cottages down through

several generations, take pride in their landscapes (Photo 9), which also are home to some very large old trees. As with many communities, there is always some citizen who has good intentions but who is, well, perhaps a little weird in his thinking. One such neighbor believed in killing poison ivy with his “patented” blue (and brown) tarp method, which wasn’t working (Photo 10 & Inset). Many in the community wanted him to stop placing the horrendous blue tarps all over the community to snuff out poison ivy, so they asked me to address this issue in my report...which I was happy to do.

Lowest Bid Déjà Vu: One of the more frustrating facts of life about our industry is the turnover of people and the difficulty in obtaining good labor. Another is the continual search for the lowest bid by government, corporations, or even property owners. I was called into an upscale mall in 2011 to help them solve a juniper problem, which resulted in the shrub hedge’s gradual decline and death from Phomopsis Blight (Photo 11A). With my advice of reducing water usage and spray on the juniper hedge and an occasional treatment of thiophanate methyl (T-Methyl-G, Cleary 3336, etc.), the hedge dramatically recovered to great health within a year or two (Photo 11A

Inset). I hadn’t been back to the site for several years, but I was once again summoned to the site in 2021. Because of the lowest bid, a new company had been managing the site including the juniper hedge. Under new management, the shrub once again declined from mismanagement and the increase of Phomopsis Blight. Now the shrub has declined so severely that hundreds of feet of the hedge will need to be replaced (Photo 11B). A costly mistake due to the “Lowest Bid”.

The Tree Doctor’s Diary Travelogue Series:

Whenever I am called out to look at tree and landscape issues, I try to work some fun and adventure into my trip. You never know what you might encounter; some locations are planned, and some are surprises. Following are several examples.

P8

The death of this tree in this highly maintained landscape was caused by Imazapyr herbicide application to the mulched area. Note that the tree to the left with a very small mulch ring in turf is not affected to any appreciable extent.

P9

In this older cottage lake community in Southwest Michigan, people take landscaping very seriously. Note the plethora of colors and textures of a wide variety of plants.

P10

Every community has an individual who has good intentions but whose efforts just do not always coincide with those of other community members. In this community, an individual cares about eliminating poison ivy but just doesn’t quite know about the right procedure. This ‘Terminator’ is using the blue tarp method to kill poison ivy without much success (Inset). However, he was successful at destroying many wildflowers and other groundcovers with his blue tarp.

P11A & 11B

About 10 years ago, I advised managers of an upscale outdoor mall on the techniques to manage Phomopsis blight on their juniper hedge (Photo 11A). Within a year or two, the junipers had returned to good health (Photo 11A Inset). Ten years later and after another “lowest bid” contract, the extensive juniper hedge would now need replacement due to mismanagement. A costly mistake.



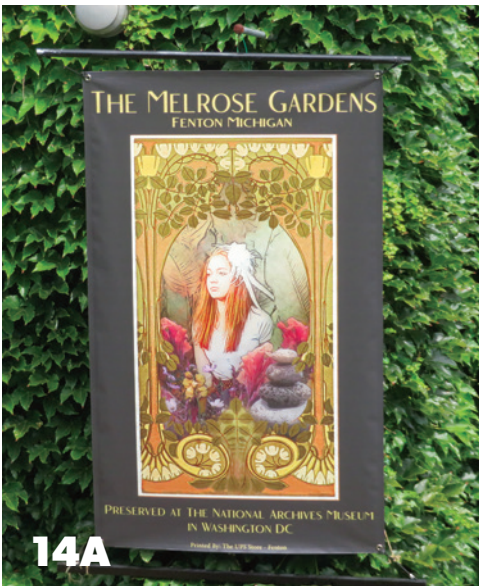
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Maple Eating Sign on Maple Street:

There are conspiracy theories being circulated on the web that trees are dangerous because they spread COVID-19 and consume all manner of things. While I didn't believe it, now I do! See Photo 12. Enuf said.

Big Trees:

I love large, grand old trees and try to “commune” with them whenever I get the chance. The history they could tell, having been born long before I arrived on Planet Earth. While visiting a community in Southwest Michigan to deliver a program on Oak Wilt, I could readily understand why the



residents were worried about this lethal disease. Photo 13 shows one of the many large oak residents of this community.

Melrose Gardens in Fenton: On my way home from visiting Dennis and his spruce tree dilemma near Holly, Michigan, I discovered a delightful garden in Fenton. The garden is known as Melrose Gardens and is supported by the National Archives Museum in Washington D.C. ((Photo 14A). It has a variety of landscape

P12 Just as the conspiracy theories on social media indicate, trees are dangerous omnivores and may eat anything. In this case, a maple eats a sign on Maple Street!


P13 During my travels, I'm always looking for large old trees. This red oak located in a Lake Michigan community in Southwest Michigan is a gem. In a lecture to the community, I advised them on methods to avoid Oak Wilt.

**P14A
14B
14C
&14D** During my travels to all parts of Michigan, I sometimes stumbled across unique sites I didn't know existed. This is Melrose Gardens in Fenton, Michigan, where many unique plants and hardscape items provide a stunning environment. Because of its historic prominence, this garden is supported by the National Archives in Washington D.C.

P15 The SS Spartan serves as a parts depot for its sister ship the SS Badger, which still makes daily pilgrimages across Lake Michigan to Manitowoc, Wisconsin during the warm season, ferrying tourists and their autos/motorcycles, large semi-trucks, and even large, heavy items such as wind generator blades. In this photo, the Spartan dwarfs my transportation of the day, a 2009 Road King Police painted in two-tone green and white. Appropriate, eh?

features that are well maintained and is a very pleasant environment to spend some time (Photos 14B, 14C, and 14 D). This is a good destination for lunch or coffee and if you love eclectic places.

Spartan & Badger History: On one of my "rides" up the West Coast of Michigan, I ended up in Ludington one day. When in the area, I always try to stop and visit the SS Badger and SS Spartan (Photo 15), which were lake ferries constructed in 1952 by the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad to haul railroad cars across Lake Michigan. The Badger, which is

considered a National Historic Landmark, still sails across Lake Michigan to Manitowoc, Wisconsin during the summer months, hauling everything including tourists and their cars/motorcycles, semi-trucks, and even those gigantic wind power blades. These two ships were the largest Car Ferries to operate on the Great Lakes and hold a special place in my heart because my father worked on the C&O Railroad for several years in the early 1950s to supplement his farm income. 



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