The Lowest Bid: OAK WILT TERRORISM

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A True Story:

Karen, a resident near Duck Lake in Highland Township, Michigan, contacted me recently about problems with her oaks. Apparently, many of her oak trees were dying. She related that a tree trimmer knocked on her door in April and offered to prune her trees, since he and his crew were "in the area". The price for the pruning job was unbelievably cheap. When other residents learned of the cheap pruning offers from this "arborist", they also wanted in on the great deal. Lisa, another resident, called her parents in Bloomfield Hills about the unbelievable price on the pruning of her oak trees; her parents related that they could never get that great price in Bloomfield Hills. Lisa's parents undoubtedly wondered if they had been cheated all these year by their professional arborist who charged more and who refused to prune their oaks during the spring and summer. Back in Highland, the tree trimmer preferred cash since the price was so low and the job was performed on the spot. After the tree trimmer left, all homeowners went to sleep that night feeling good that they had obtained such an unbelievably cheap service in these hard economic times.

Within two to three weeks, however, the foliage of most of the pruned oak trees in this community began to wilt, turn brown and drop from the trees (Photo 1). Pale green leaves fell from the trees. Some brown leaves remained attached to the trees. Eventually, all of the oak trees that had been pruned exhibited similar symptoms. By June, the residents became concerned that their lawns were covered with leaves as if it was the fall season (Photo 2). They raked their lawns and disposed of the leaves on one day, but by the next day, their lawns were once again covered with leaves. They were very worried about what was happening to their trees. Many of the trees were between 40 and 80 years old; a few had approached a century and beyond. Luckily, Karen had kept the phone number of the "arborist" who had pruned their trees. The arborist claimed that the trees were dying from the heat and drought. This response from the tree trimmer didn't seem quite right; hadn't it been one of the wettest springs on record? Hadn't these trees been through "heat and drought" previously in their long lives? Why were the trees that had only been trimmed by the "arborist" dying while other neighbors' trees that had not been pruned appeared perfectly healthy?

Photo 1: Near the shores of Duck Lake in Highland Twp., this entire clump of oak trees is dying from oak wilt. The homeowners didn't know that a cheap pruning job in April by an unscrupulous, so-called "professional arborist" would lead to tree decline and death of all their red oak trees by mid-summer.

Photo 2: In addition to wilting and death, one of the most prominent features of oak wilt is "leaves on the ground," a typical symptom of oak wilt that began in May rather than in the fall, when the normal deciduous phase of healthy oaks should occur.

Photo 3: The upper canopy of the trees affected by Oak Wilt exhibited wilting, sparse foliage.

Photo 4: A classical but not often seen symptom of oak wilt is the tanning of the leaf tips while the base of the leaf remains green. This epicormic shoot emerged from the trunk in an attempt by the tree to recover from the lethal fungal attack. Note fresh spur marks.

Karen performed numerous inquiries on web searches and to other landscape and arborists' businesses. She finally reached me and exclaimed that she believed she had oak wilt. When I arrived in the community in mid-July, I immediately spotted the affected trees, which were conspicuous with their sparse wilting foliage and obvious last throes of life (Photos 3 & 4). Indeed, only the trees that had been pruned were dying from oak wilt. Other oak trees in nearby residences that had not been pruned appeared quite healthy. Upon close examination, the tree trim-

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mers had "spiked" (with shoe irons or steel spikes) their way up the oak trees, a practiced abandoned decades ago by professional arborists (Photo 5). The injuries created by spikes alone were sufficient to attract oak wilt to trees. Although I had already developed strong suspicions that the "arborist" was not a professional, I was totally disgusted with the observations of the spiking, which I had not known from the residents before my actual visit. Further examinations revealed that only one or a couple small diameter branches at the lowest points on the trunk had been pruned from the tree. Clearly, the pruning job was a snow job. In my opinion, these trees did not even need to be pruned. Even so, they had not been properly pruned. These observations confirmed that this so called "arborist" was indeed a scam artist, who didn't know what he was doing and/or didn't care.

Photo 5: The trees of several residents adjacent to Duck Lake were spurred in order to reach one or two of the smallest and lowest branches to complete the pruning job; that's all it took to initiate oak wilt.

A bout of depression consumed me. I had been trying to educate the public and professionals alike about the seriousness of oak wilt for more than two decades. Had I failed in my attempts?

Revisiting Oak Wilt:

Oak Wilt is a lethal disease caused by the fungus, Ceratocystis fagacearum. The Oak wilt fungus readily kills members of the red oak family while members of the white oak group are sometime less affected. The fungus is transmitted two ways: by sap beetles to fresh wounds created from pruning or storm injury (Photo 6), and through root grafts. One of the primary methods in managing oak wilt is avoidance: avoid pruning oak trees during the warm season (spring, summer and fall) and implement rapid corrective measures for storm-damage trees. Some experts recommend the avoidance of pruning during the months of April, May and June, but given the importance and value of our oaks and the fact that the fungus and sap beetle do not necessarily abide by our artificial calendar (example: June 30 vs. July 2), I recommend dormant pruning only. If infected trees are sufficiently close to healthy oaks to be root grafted together (Photo 7), severing the root grafts (trenching) and/or trunk injections with a fungicide may be advised.

Although I believe that oak wilt occurs throughout Michigan and neighboring states, its occurrence is not as prevalent or insidious as other lethal tree problems such as Dutch Elm Disease and Emerald Ash Borer. However, oak wilt can be just as devastating "locally" as any other lethal disease or pest. Once established in an area, it is very difficult to eradicate and very expensive to manage.

Oak wilt is a very complex disease. This brief synopsis of

Photo 6: At another residential community in Commerce TWP, several hundred-plus-year-old oak trees died last year after infection by the oak wilt fungus through limb breakage during a storm in early 2010. Those trees were removed and the stumps were ground (foreground). Unfortunately, in 2011, many other nearby oaks are succumbing to oak wilt, via root grafts from the previously killed trees.

Photo 7: Another view of the same residence in Commerce TWP shows an infected tree on the left. Because of the density of the red oaks in this community and the adjacent Highland Recreational Area, the fungus, unless stopped, has the potential to advance into other properties and theoretically for miles (albeit over many years) via root graft transmission.

the disease does not provide sufficient information for expert analysis and management of oak wilt situations. There is, however, abundant information on the web, in extension publications, books, etc. My web site, www.anr.msu.edu/robertsd contains fairly exhaustive information.

A Message for Homeowners:

There's an old adage – "you get what you pay for." Another one is "penny wise and pound foolish." Often, these sayings are true. Most of us like a good deal that can sometimes lead to foolish decisions and less than desirable results. However, as in the story related in this article, that "good deal" can translate from having to pay several hundred dollars in pruning costs to many

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$1000s in tree removals and replacements, property losses and property value depreciation. When working with landscape and tree plant health care providers, as with any profession, there are several things to consider. If you already have a good company and you are satisfied with their work, it might be best to continue patronizing that company. If you are considering another service, simply do not succumb to the quick sell and lowest bid. The following might be considered to be a checklist.

1) **Reputation:** Is the company a reputable company and has it been around for a while? Or, are they just passing through the neighborhood trying to make a fast buck? They should readily provide references upon request.
2) **Insurance:** Is the company you are about to hire insured? Remember, if someone is working on you property and is injured, you could be liable. Additionally, any mistakes or unintended consequences should be covered by the company's insurance policy.
3) **Education and Knowledge:** Does the company owner or foreman have degrees or advanced education in the services they are about to provide? Do they seem particularly knowledgeable about the services they are about to provide? With a little inquisitiveness, valuable information can be garnered from the service.
4) **Professionalism:** Does the company appear professional. That rusty old truck without a muffler may initially indicate cheaper prices but it may also indicate other unwanted attributes about the company. Do they listen and respect your wishes of the services you desire?
5) **Certification:** If applying pesticides, the applicators must be certified. Ask to see their certification issued by the Department of Agriculture. Some plant health care professionals also have certification from other sources.
6) **Professional Affiliation:** Is the company affiliated with a professional association such as the Michigan Green Industry Association (MGIA)? An affiliation indicates that the company and its employees partake in seminars, workshops conferences as well as subscriptions to professional journals. Many associations offer lists of members of their professional affiliates.
7) **Cost of Services:** Because professional companies pay their employees a decent wage with ancillary benefits, carry insurance, are licensed and certified, attend professional seminars to maintain current knowledge about various practices, among other business expenses, they must charge a reasonable fee for their professional services. Often, the lowest bid is not the best bid. The fees that professionals charge will be more cost effective in the long run.
8) **Educate Yourself:** Are you at least a little aware of what needs to be done at your property and how it should be accomplished. The web, various publications including books and extension publications, verbal inquiries ("word of mouth") offer a plethora of information that will enable the average homeowner or business owner to be somewhat knowledgeable about the needs of the trees or landscape and the company they are about to hire. It is significant that homeowners from the two separate communities (Highland and Commerce) highlighted in this article independently did their own research on the web to essentially diagnose oak wilt, which ultimately led them to me.

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