



# The Plant Doctor's LANDSCAPE TIPS

By Dr. David L. Roberts, The Plant Doctor LLC a.k.a. The Tree Doctor

## ARBORICULTURE AND ETHICS: ADVANCING KNOWLEDGE AND TRANSFORMING LIVES

### INTRODUCTION

It's a Dog Eat Dog World out there . . . or so the expression goes. What that means is that everyone in this great industry of ours is often in competition with others. Competition is actually part of the entrepreneurial spirit and "Capitalism" that we engage in in the good ole U.S. of A to provide a better service or product than our competitors. It's not only what we do to survive but it's what we do to excel. The title of this article could easily read "Ethics in the Nursery Business", or "Ethics in the Landscape", or "Ethics in Turfgrass Management", etc . . . Instead, I chose "Ethics and Arboriculture" as the synonym for all facets of the Plant Industry.

During my rather long career of almost 50 years as a scientist, I have witnessed A LOT! My role as a scientist and educator for over 40 years at Michigan State University included creative endeavors (research) and an extension of those endeavors (knowledge) to the public. The target of that knowledge may be anyone within the Michigan border and beyond, "should they choose to accept it". The target may range from the professional arborist, landscaper, or nurseryperson to the common Michigander. The mission of Michigan State University as Michigan's premier Land Grant University may be summarized as "To Advance Knowledge and Transform Lives". I had adopted that mission, which became my mission for decades at MSU and is now my role in retirement as the Plant Doctor . . . hence, the subtitle for this article.

Ethics in our industry is often a matter of opinion, much like people's differing views on religion or politics. Sure, there are some rather straightforward matters that virtually all of us can agree upon. For example, it would be considered unethical to charge clients for services we did not provide. Or it would be unethical to steal a chain saw from a client's open garage just because we were hired to remove some trees. Other examples may be less obvious and might even be associated with gray areas.

Follow along as I convey some of my experiences over the years in matters involving ethics in our industry.

### TAR SPOT AND THE CITY FORESTER, SO MANY TREES SO LITTLE TIME

Many years ago, I was summoned to a city in Michigan to help with a "devastating disease" that was "killing" most street maples. As I recall, it was late August and trees had been dropping leaves as if, at least to some folks, the trees were dying (Photo 1). You see, the city had been receiving many complaints about leaves on their homeowners' lawns accompanied by bare branches in trees; with public pressure the city believed it needed to act. I tried to explain to the city forester who asked for my assistance that Tar Spot does not kill trees. I enjoined that the trees, even those that exhibited some defoliation, would be fine next year. It used to be that Tar Spot was not common in most parts of Michigan; now it is very common throughout Michigan. It used to be that Tar Spot did not cause defoliation like other diseases; now it occasionally causes

some defoliation. The city forester did not seem to be listening to me; crews were out removing trees due to public concern for leaf drop and the grotesque black spots on the falling foliage. It also became rather obvious that the city forester was confusing Tar Spot with Maple Decline, which causes branch and section dieback over several years. Perhaps Tar Spot control in this city was less of an ethical issue and more of a knowledge deficiency issue. But when people in responsible positions choose to enact drastic measures in lieu of seeking alternative advice and knowledge, it may arguably become an ethical matter.

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**Photo 1:** One year many years ago in a Galaxy far, far away, Tar Spot developed in epidemic proportions on Norway maples in a Michigan city. Residents became concerned that their trees were dying and needed to be removed, because trees were dropping leaves in August (Inset). To respond to the outcry, the city forester began removing trees apparently believing Tar Spot was killing the trees when in fact it is a nonlethal disease. I tried to convince the city forester that a public educational program was needed rather than tree removal.



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#### "ARBORIST HACKERS", TAKE THE MONEY AND RUN

What does it take to be an "arborist"? Answer: A pickup truck and a chainsaw. Forget about education, degrees, certifications, and society/association memberships. I think, unfortunately, the public all too often believes an "arborist" describes anyone who works on trees. Tree patients are not unlike human patients – they require special care by knowledgeable experts. However, there are many small businesses scattered throughout Michigan whose owners and employees never attend a conference, never attend a seminar to improve their knowledge and skills, and never enroll in a certification program. For those who are reading this article, they are your competitors. They usually underbid you, require immediate cash for payment, are uninsured, and flee the scene of the "crime" as quickly as possible. While much of their work goes unnoticed, some does not. Perhaps the most obvious evidence of their passage through a neighborhood occurs when they prune some oaks in the spring, leaving behind a devastating Oak Wilt mess (Photo 2). When these hackers are confronted, they invariably say, "We've never heard of Oak

Wilt before". While some may use this as an excuse the first time, many continue to use it as "They Take the Money and Run." The only thing that seems to stop them is when they are sued, which many property owners are reluctant to do.

#### PESTICIDAL WATER, IT'S AN ORGANIC THING

Some less than ethical people apply water to trees affected by pests or diseases . . . and charge for the application; they are sometimes sufficiently brazen to brag about it. It is not unusual for Plant Health Care Providers (Arborists, Landscapers, etc.) to be asked to save a tree that appears dead. In some cases, the tree may be dead. In other situations, the tree may appear dead but isn't. One of the more common examples of this dilemma is Scab on crabapple/apple. Scab is a multicyclic disease that continues to infect the foliage of *Malus* sp. throughout the summer when weather conditions are conducive for disease development. Often, by July or August, trees are largely defoliated (Photo 3). Now, your client wants you to spray the tree with something to save it. You try to explain the tree is not dead or even severely affected by the disease. But your client wants you to spray something anyway . . . even

threatening to supplant you with another arborist who will spray something. Isn't the customer always right? No. Believe it or not, arborists have lamented this situation to me on quite a few occasions over the years. So what happens when the arborist tries his/her best to argue that no treatments are necessary nor will they be effective . . . without success with their client? Why apply a pesticide to the landscape environment when it will have no benefit? Some arborists walk away, some spray the trees with a fungicide to placate the homeowner, and some spray the trees with water. This matter represents an ethical dilemma. How do you satisfy the customer while doing the right thing? Some arborists who spray water have elicited some convincing logic: Water does no harm to the environment; the customer is informed that the spray is organic; the environment is not polluted with an unnecessary application of a pesticide; the arborist makes money; the arborist keeps the client to apply the proper treatments the following year; the client is happy. While some readers may view this as a laughable win-win situation, it is nonetheless a cloudy ethical kerfuffle.

#### OAK WILT, ADVANCING CONSPIRACY THEORIES

A "Conglomerate" consisting of government, an arborist society, and a coalition is promoting an Oak Wilt management method through a qualifications program and other venues that is devastating to the local environment, costly to Michiganders to the point of threatening their lifetime savings, and potentially unethical for arborists . . . and their clients, Michiganders. This method involves sacrificing many healthy trees in the vicinity of Oak Wilt-infected trees . . . unnecessarily in my opinion. In one case, I was brought into a site where over 32 large healthy oak trees were to be sacrificed for one oak tree that became infected from a broken branch during a storm; I recommended a procedure that I had developed that resulted in no sacrifice of healthy trees (Photo 4). In another that was brought to my attention, over 60 trees were to be sacrificed according to the conglomerate's preferred/promoted method. And in yet another, at least 300-400 trees are slated for



PHOTO 2

**Photo 2:** There are many Tree Hackers who believe they are arborists because they have a chainsaw and a pickup truck. They present themselves as professionals who charge minimal fees. In this situation, the Hacker company was a door knocker, operated on a cash only basis, and disappeared as quickly as he arrived. Lisa, the property owner, would learn to her horror about Oak Wilt as evidence of the Hacker's passage through her neighborhood. The live tree on the left was the only tree not pruned because it was on the neighbor's property.



PHOTO 3

**Photo 3:** Crabapples and apples are afflicted with a fungal disease known as Scab. The disease often results in severe defoliation by late July or August. However, trees do not die from the disease and recover the following year. Because many homeowners believe their trees have gone to tree heaven, they often ask arborists to remove the trees . . . which some do. Other clients ask arborists to spray "something". This disease can be controlled with treatments in the spring and early summer but treatments late in the season will have no impact. In such situations, perhaps water applications may placate our clients?



**Photo 4:** It is unfortunate for Michigan residents that a Conglomerate is foisting a very destructive technique for the remediation of Oak Wilt on the public. This method will not only destroy large numbers of healthy oak trees but will harm the local ecosystem and drain people's life savings. In this satellite image of one property, the white circles represent where trench lines would be installed followed by the elimination of all trees within the circles . . . in this case at least 32 healthy trees. The yellow and orange circles represent alternative, effective methods with few to no sacrificial trees. Is it ethical for the promotion of such a destructive technique when other methods are far less destructive and far less costly?

destruction. When a group promotes a certain agenda without allowing other research, opinions, and experiences to be voiced, then this can be regarded as highly unethical. It can also be lucrative for arborists who land these contracts. But is it ethical? I think not. If the Conglomerate is withholding or suppressing information that could be beneficial to arborists and their clients, then, there is something seriously awry. Thankfully, many arborists are reluctant to bid on and support this potentially destructive method and associated contracts because they believe it is unethical.

**IT'S A MILESTONE, TO SAY THE LEAST**



**PHOTO 5A**



**PHOTO 5B**

**Photos 5A & 5B:** A business specializing in weed control at commercial properties was advised by a supplier to try an herbicide known as Milestone. This herbicide was developed for pasture lands, not landscapes. Deep within the fine print, which the supplier had apparently not examined, was a warning that severe harm would come to leguminous plants that were exposed to this herbicide. After application of the herbicide to cracks in the pavement, most honey locusts on the property were killed (Photo 5A). Note that in a couple instances where honey locusts were more removed from the pavement areas trees were not as severely harmed (Photo 5B).

weed control in mulched areas, weed control in pavement/curb cracks, etc. A supplier had recommended a new herbicide that the applicator had never heard of before. The recommended herbicide trade name was Milestone (Aminopyralid), and it was to be applied to cracks in the pavement for weed suppression. Unfortunately, many honey locust trees died. Was the problem salt injury from winter deicing salts? Was the culprit herbicide toxicity? Was it something else? I was able to zero in on the likely problem as herbicide toxicity; reviewing the bowels of the herbicide label for Milestone, there was a warning: serious injury may result from applications near leguminous plants. Honey locust is a leguminous tree. Was the supplier unethical or just uninformed? Perhaps the applicator should not have trusted the supplier for a first-time broad-spectrum application of a new herbicide?

**MR. SCROOGE, THE FREE LUNCH**

Is our customer always right? Not always. Have you ever been in a restaurant and the person at the next table grumbles about his lunch to the manager, claiming the food was awful, even though he cleaned his plate? To appease the grumbler, the restaurant manager often rescinds the bill. Like restauraners, some arborists have problematic clients as well. Clients often expect the arborist or

his crew to be at their home 24/7 but do not want to pay for the service. I occasionally am called in as a mediator or fact finder of sorts. In one case, an arborist was asked by a property owner to remediate Oak Wilt. The arborist asked me for advice, and I supplied my opinion regarding what procedures could be implemented. The property owner selected the least invasive, least disruptive, and least costly procedure. While at the property, I noticed a nice, weed-free landscape and remarked to the homeowner how beautiful his landscape appeared (Photo 6) . . . surreptitiously trying to get around to my main question: "Do you use herbicides?" The property owner retrieved a jug of Ortho Ground Clear (Photo 6 Inset) from his garage and proudly proclaimed he



**PHOTO 6**

**Photo 6:** When an arborist asked me to help remediate an Oak Wilt outbreak on private property, I remarked to the homeowner how beautiful and weed-free his landscape was. Prompting the homeowner to divulge whether he used herbicides, I was concerned that homeowner activities might interfere with the arborist's efforts in controlling Oak Wilt. The homeowner proudly produced a container of Ortho Ground Clear, which contains the deadly herbicide Imazapyr. Sure enough, the evidence of dead trees the following year prompted the homeowner to try to blame the arborist.

had just made another application this summer. Seeing Imazapyr on the label, I warned both the homeowner and arborist that there could be dead trees next year due to the Imazapyr application. I even provided copies of my *Landscape* articles regarding Imazapyr herbicide toxicity. Sure enough, the following year, the property owner tried to blame the arborist for dead trees and wanted (at least) free removals. I politely reminded the homeowner that he had used a toxic herbicide around his trees.

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#### CORPORATE MATTERS, CAUGHT WITH THEIR PLANTS DOWN

In 2011, the reputable corporation DuPont released a new herbicide that was supposed to revolutionize broadleaf weed control in turfgrass. Within the first season of application, however, it was discovered that Imprelis (Potassium salt of aminocyclopyrachlor) caused severe damage to many landscape trees and other plants (Photos 7A & 7B). Conifers and leguminous deciduous trees were especially harmed. What happened? Apparently, the chemical had not been thoroughly tested before its release. MANY trees were harmed or killed east of the Mississippi River. It could be surmised that DuPont was unethical for not testing the chemical sufficiently before its release. It could also be viewed as a series of unintended errors. Many landscapers and turf professionals lost



PHOTO 7A



PHOTO 7B

**Photos 7A & 7B:** Around 2011, DuPont released its new Imprelis herbicide that was supposed to revolutionize broadleaf weed control in turf areas. Unfortunately for DuPont, for many professional turf managers and for many property owners, the chemical had not been tested as thoroughly as it should have been. Tree harm and death ensued. Conifers were especially affected (Photo 7A). Deciduous trees were also affected. Because of its carboxylic acid chemistry, Imprelis affected leguminous trees much like Milestone herbicide does; note dead Honey Locust trees in this parking lot (Photo 7B). Oak and maples were not affected by the herbicide to any appreciable extent (Photo 7B right). Was this an ethical dilemma, a mistake, or both?

credibility with their clients who had trees and shrubs affected by the herbicide. Should applicators not have adopted the herbicide for widespread use before gaining experience? Or did applicators rely upon the credibility of DuPont? Many turf managers avoided widespread use the first season because of the new herbicide's unproven efficacy. What can be attributed to ethics and what can be attributed to mistakes? In my opinion and according to many others, DuPont did an admirable job of addressing the matter.

#### DISCUSSION

What ethical standards we should be supporting are sometimes rather obvious. On many occasions, however, ethical issues fall into gray areas. Like religion and politics, people often disagree with what is ethical and what is not. Disagreement on various matters is normal in our American society and is essentially supported by the United States Constitution. In this article I presented a variety of examples of my experiences that may involve ethics. Some of these are rather obvious morality concerns. Others are not. I generally do not involve myself in questioning people's or entities' morality, because I think everyone

needs to develop their own ethical standards. Furthermore, I do not believe I have the position of Morality Police. Unfortunately, there are a few people in our industry who believe they are the Morality Police; they are opinionated, obnoxious, rude, always right, and aggressive to the point that it is a religion with them; often they are also unethical but do not mind preaching to others. Some of the matters disclosed in this article are simply mistakes. If for example, a supplier recommends a new herbicide and that herbicide kills non-target plants, doesn't that matter fall under the category of an innocent mistake? Not necessarily. If a supplier is recommending and selling a new herbicide but has not familiarized himself/herself with the herbicide label, couldn't that be construed as negligence and therefore unethical? We all make mistakes. But when we know we are doing things that are inappropriate to advance our own careers and to enrich ourselves, then it is likely unethical. 🌱

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*The Tree Doctor will be speaking on "Trellis Rust Across Michigan" and "The Advantages & Dangers of Herbicides in the Landscape" on Tuesday, February 28th at the MGIA 36th Annual Trade Show & Convention at the Suburban Collection Showplace in Novi, Michigan.*

*Don't miss the Tree Doctor's class "The Tree Doctor's Diary & Oak Wilt Update" on March 23, 2023 For more information or to register, visit [www.landscape.org](http://www.landscape.org).*

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