



The Plant Doctor's LANDSCAPE TIPS

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

DUMB AND DUMBER: Boat Attacks Maple Tree

INTRODUCTION

They knew there might be a problem when the SUV pulling a sailboat careened down their long drive at about 50 miles per hour. Would the SUV and boat safely make the final 90-degree left hand turn for the final leg of the drive?

Anna is a seamstress who owns a business in which she designs and sews very high-quality custom covers for, well, just about anything you'd want. Want a nice custom-fit car cover for that 70's Muscle Car? Anna can do it. Need a custom fit cover for that 1937 Harley Davidson Panhead? She can do that too. Anna's husband, Bill, also helps her. To simplify matters without revealing true identities, I'll refer to them as Anna and Bill Seamstress. In the present situation, the customer that was throwing gravel as he sped down the driveway had called ahead and scheduled an appointment to drop off his sailboat so Anna could fabricate a form-fitting cover for which she had earned a fabulous reputation and a growing clientele who desired her high-quality services.

THE "ACCIDENT"

Should it even be called an "accident"? Mr. Knucklehead (my assigned name for the driver of the SUV) finally brought his SUV and boat to a skidding halt on the gravel drive without incident . . . luckily. Whew! After some introductions and attempted pleasantries, Bill asked Mr. Knucklehead to pull into the front yard and back the boat up the drive and into the pole barn. Bill offered to back the boat into the pole barn because, well, some people are not particularly adept at "backing" trailers. Mr. Knucklehead declined the offer for help; Bill naturally concluded that the visitor must know what he's doing. To not dwell on the subject of backing and positioning trailers, it quickly became apparent that Mr. Knucklehead did not know what he was doing. After several attempts and before Bill could stop him, the SUV with trailer and sailboat in tow suddenly accelerated briskly toward the pole barn (Photo 1).



Photo 1

Photo 1: This sugar maple was planted as a small seedling by Anna and Bill Seamstress' father approximately 30 years ago. Bill's father passed away several years ago; the tree had become an important memorial to his legacy in the family. The tree was doing fine until a careless driver ("Mr. Knucklehead") struck the tree while pulling a sailboat with his SUV.

Clearly, the intention of Knucklehead was to perform a U-turn around the tree to line up for easier backing into the pole barn. Anna and Bill became alarmed with Knucklehead's intentions because they knew it would be difficult for an SUV pulling a boat trailer to navigate through the narrow space, the reason they asked the driver customer to back up the drive from the front lawn. Unfortunately, not only was Mr. Knucklehead not an expert in backing up, but he was also not an expert in being cognizant that trailers usually do not follow the direct path of the tow vehicle. In making the U-turn around the sugar maple, Mr. Knucklehead caught the tree with a sharp frame member on the boat trailer (Photo 2, arrow). This stopped his forward motion . . . but only temporarily. He decided that rather than back up the trailer to give the tree a wider berth, he should simply gun the engine of the tow vehicle. The onset of power from



Photo 2

Photo 2: This photo shows where the boat trailer (yellow arrow) caught the sugar maple's trunk. As we might guess, the driver (Mr. Knucklehead) of the SUV was a long way from clearing the tree when attempting a U-turn.

the tow SUV cut a deep groove in the trunk of the tree as the trailer and sailboat were flung around the pivot point of the trailer in contact with the tree. The injury/groove circumnavigated approximately 50% of the tree trunk's circumference (Photo 3); bark was also removed with the aggressive maneuver.

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Photo 3

Photo 3: The damage to the sugar maple was severe. The vascular system of the tree was essentially girdled for about 50% of its circumference. The prognosis for its long-term survival is uncertain.



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But Wait, There's More . . .

Now, I don't know about you, but I would want to avoid any risks to damage other people's property. In this case, I would have carefully watched for the track of the boat trailer to ensure the trailing boat would follow the tow vehicle and not strike anything inadvertently. Knucklehead didn't seem to care. If you "lean" an object such as a car, boat, and trailer into a tree, something has got to give. While certainly not a large old granddaddy of a tree like we see all over Michigan, this sugar maple had the mass, anchorage, and strength to resist the forward progress of the SUV and boat/trailer. Why did Mr. Knucklehead gun the engine rather than back up? It is a mystery. In gunning the engine, the tree had the superior mass and strength to push the back end of the boat/trailer combo out into a wider arch. That wider arch caused the boat to strike Anna's car, causing even more damage to the Seamstresses' business (Photo 4).



Photo 4

Photo 4: After the boat trailer "hooked" the sugar maple, rather than back up to give the tree a wider berth, Mr. Knucklehead gunned the engine of his SUV to hopefully "over-power" the kerfuffle. His sudden acceleration flung the boat out and around in a wider arch, and the boat struck the Seamstresses' car. Mr. Knucklehead is a danger to all of us!!!!

But Wait, There's More . . .

When I visited Anna and Bill to help them with their dilemma, they showed me the sailboat that Mr. Knucklehead had dropped off (Photo 5). Of particular concern to them was that when the boat was delivered, it was only attached to the trailer by a loose knot at the winch in the front of the trailer (Photo 5 Inset). It was not anchored or strapped to the trailer, making for a very dangerous situation. As a person who occasionally rides a motorcycle, I worry about people who do not have their trailers and objects properly attached to their tow vehicle . . . in addition to all those drivers who are distracted. With this surreal story, I concluded that Mr. Knucklehead was a threat to society. I advised the Seamstresses to contact the local law enforcement not only to report the property damage but to relay the threat that Mr. Knucklehead poses to other people on the road.



Photo 5

Photo 5: Mr. Knucklehead's boat is finally positioned in the Seamstresses' garage where a custom cover will be fabricated. When I visited Anna and Bill, they showed me another concern. Mr. Knucklehead had delivered the boat without it being properly attached to the trailer. It was only attached by a small rope with a loose knot from the winch. This guy is a danger to us all!!!



Photo 6

Photo 6: It's sad that such a gorgeous sugar maple tree was so severely damaged by such a careless person. I have looked at many sugar maples over many decades and this was one of the nicest specimens I had ever encountered. The foliage was dense and exhibited no serious diseases, pests, or physiological disorders.

Mr. Knucklehead was so apologetic for all the damage he caused that he relentlessly consoled the Seamstresses by claiming he would pay for all damages.

Believe it or not, after all this turmoil, Mr. Knucklehead asked Anna if she would still sew him a custom-fit boat cover!! 🌿

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CONCLUSION & RESOLUTION

Seamstress Anna and Bill requested my assistance to determine if their sugar maple could survive this much damage and to provide some assessment for insurance reasons. The tree was very special to the Seamstress family. It had been planted by Bill's father thirty years ago as a small seedling. Bill's father passed away several years ago, so the tree serves as a valuable memorial to his legacy for the family. As we know, tree values are assessed according to a variety of factors: age, species, size, health, location, etc. The memorial value is very difficult to ascertain. One of the interesting aspects about this tree is that of all the sugar maples I have examined over the years, this sugar maple was one of the best specimens I have ever witnessed. It exhibited perfect form (Photo 6) with dense foliage. And, there were no serious diseases, pests, nutritional disorders or any other imperfections on the tree . . . until the boat attack. In addition to providing advice for insurance purposes, I also advised Anna and Bill on what they could do to help the tree survive and recover as much as possible. Frankly, the prognosis is uncertain.