

Tree Check-Up

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Most people will walk around their car, giving it a visual inspection or have a trained mechanic look at it before taking a long trip. But how many of us have walked around the trees in their yard or common area inspecting their condition, or had a trained tree care professional “arborist” look at their trees? Why do this in the first place you might ask? A good answer is that you might spot a hazard tree before it can damage your property or cause injury to a visitor or family member; or, you might spot a potential problem that can be corrected so that your tree can remain healthy and attractive. Here are some helpful hints on what to look for during your tree check-up.

Risk Tree: Before you conduct your inspection you should consider the “*targets*” around your property. A target is something that you wish to protect. Samples of targets would be the dwelling, garage, driveway, roadway, outbuilding, basketball court etc. You should concentrate your efforts around these targets to avoid the most serious damage. A tree falling in the middle of the woods will do little damage if it doesn’t hit anything of value whereas a tree falling near your home has the potential to do great harm. A risk tree is any tree that is dead, declining, damaged, or has any structural defect that has the potential of impacting a target.

Declining Tree: Declining trees may be risk trees but sometimes you can improve their condition so they regain their health. To spot a tree in decline you need to visualize what a healthy tree looks like. Most healthy trees have large full crowns and their foliage has a deep green color. Healthy trees have a clean, straight trunk with very few signs of rot or decay. They also have a “root swell” at ground level. Healthy trees also have solid branch attachments and good overall form. Declining trees on the other hand could have small crowns, poor coloration, signs of rot and decay and large dead branches. Dead branches at the top of the tree are a sure sign of a declining tree since they normally indicate that the roots or vascular system has been injured. Declining trees could also have a pronounced lean, or have very little root swell looking more like a telephone pole than a tree at ground level. If your trees have any of these symptoms you probably have a tree in a state of decline.

Damaged Trees: Trees could be damaged during home construction, excavation, storms, vandalism, impacts with cars, trucks, etc., insects or disease or by poor pruning practices to name a few. A tree can recover from minor wounding but sometimes it needs some tender loving care to repair the injury. In other cases the damage may be so severe that the tree becomes a risk tree. Profound damage on the main trunk can be very apparent. Extensive damage to the root system may be less obvious and would require a trained eye to spot.

Structural Defects: Structural defects consist of rot, hollow areas, significant lean, twist, or poor branch attachments that make a tree unstable, or a candidate to suffer storm damage if the right conditions present themselves. Sometimes the defect can be corrected by proper tree care while other times the only viable option is to remove the tree.

What to look For: Now that you have some idea of what could constitute a tree problem you can walk around your home, lawn, driveway etc. and give each tree a critical look. If you spot dead trees, declining trees, trees with significant rot or damaged trees you should note where they are located and list the symptoms. In addition, you should look at the foliage of your trees from time to time. If the leaves are off color, stunted, falling off the tree before autumn arrives or you notice insect damage you could have a potential problem. Often times if the problem is noticed and treated early enough, the tree suffers little permanent damage.

What to Do: If you think you have risk trees or trees that could use some help you should contact a tree care professional or “arborist” to assess the situation and recommend ways to correct the problem. Many of these professionals are listed in the phone book under “Tree Care.” It is important that you contact a “*MD Registered Tree Expert*” since these licensed tree care professionals have the necessary training and insurance coverage to safely work on your trees. Unless the person working on your trees has liability insurance you as the landowner are responsible for any personal injury or property damage that might occur if something goes wrong. Most companies will send a representative out to look at your tree, make recommendations, and provide you with a cost estimate for the work to be done. It is a good idea to ask this representative if they are a licensed Tree Expert and that they have liability insurance coverage. It is also a good idea to contact more than one company to obtain a second or third opinion, and get additional estimates. Most anyone can take a critical look at their trees and spot an obvious problem, but knowing how to size up and correct the problem takes a great deal of knowledge and skill and should be left to professionals.

Fixing the Problem: Spotting and correcting potential problems with landscaped plants will help you maintain a healthy and beautiful living space. Many times early detection and treatment will correct severe problems before they can develop. The more you learn about the trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plantings on your property the more able you will be to provide optimum care. Numerous organizations and educational opportunities exist to assist with your learning curve. Many educational opportunities will be listed on this web site, associated sites, and in local newspapers and journals.

(Many of the pictures used in this article came from the Hazard Tree Website from the U.S Forest Service.)