

DEALING WITH TREES IN A CHALLENGING ECONOMY

In a challenging economy, many people choose to make more informed decisions about their spending. So when it come to property maintenance, questions arise on the best way to care for trees. While this information may seem quite timely, **informed decision making** in tree care should be practiced even when things are more financially favorable.

The Approach

First, a tree owner must acknowledge his/her approach to tree care; **reactive** or **proactive**.

- The reactive approach repairs or removes trees after damage occurs. This is generally more expensive in the long-term, sometimes devastating, could cause the loss of important trees, and likely decreases property value.
- The proactive approach is usually less expensive in the long-term. It can protect important trees, and increase property value. The proactive approach is explained in three steps; (1) creating a tree inventory, (2) assessing that inventory, and (3) prioritizing tree needs based on risk, health and aesthetics.

The Steps

Tree Inventory

Simply walk around your property and look at what you own. Ask yourself about the importance of these trees to you. What are their benefits? Do they provide beauty, shade, privacy, filter views, control soil erosion, provide habitat, or perhaps produce fruit? Maybe your trees contribute to the maturity and character of your neighborhood? Do they pose risks to people or structures? Can you afford to lose any of these trees?

Assessment.

Trees need to be examined from two perspectives:

- The biological condition, or tree health.
- The mechanical condition, or tree structure.
- Both are equally important, but often require the knowledge and skills of an experienced arborist.

People often identify a healthy tree as one with plenty of green growth. They may also recognize dead branches, threatening limbs, or wilted and colorless foliage. But arborists should look beyond that. Trees that appear to be growing vigorously could be structurally defective and dangerous, especially those surrounded by water loving landscapes. Trees with multiple trunks often have structural defects that could possibly be reduced with proactive care.

Arborists must be knowledgeable in both the structural and biological aspects of trees, and how that relates to their care. This includes common characteristics of trees being assessed, also known as the species profile. Tree vitality, branch, limb and trunk structure, leans, cracks and decay, roots and surrounding soil are all important factors to consider during the assessment process.

Risk is the most important factor in tree assessment. People often request that trees be maintained to assure safety. **But no tree can be guaranteed as safe.** Arborists must assess levels of risk and consider tree size, its defects, the likelihood of a failure and anything significant within range of the fallen tree or its limbs, including people, structures and electrical wires. Risk assessment will help prioritize tree work required on your property.

Sometimes, property owners can provide their own treatments that improve the health of trees. Watering the root zone and mulching the soil surface are often the two simplest, least expensive and beneficial treatments. In cases of too much water, the property owner can turn off the water or adjust the irrigation pattern. Pruning is not always required and can often be postponed. In many cases, simply moving a table, chair, parking spot, or play-structure from under the limbs of a potentially high risk tree can greatly reduce risk.

Although this description of assessment has been simplified, observations by a qualified arborist can uncover problems that may be corrected or reduced before the onset of irreversible damage.

Prioritize

Budget seems to always dictates the level of tree care and should begin with reducing risk. Health is extremely important but secondary to risk management, and aesthetics is the lowest priority. Yet trained professionals work toward reducing risk, while addressing the health and aesthetic concerns in their tree pruning.

Summary

This three step approach to dealing with trees begins with (1) a tree inventory, (2) continues with an assessment of tree health and structure, and (3) follows with tree maintenance based on reducing risk, attending to health and enhancing aesthetics, in that order of priority. This strategy for tree care provides the best value and is the most effective in any economy.

Getting Started

- You can begin your *Tree Inventory* today. The most objective observations are made when the weather is clear and you do not feel rushed.
- *Assessment* of the inventory should be done by a qualified arborist. Check on the arborist's credentials, experience and reputation. Beware of those that advertise with false representation. Using discontinued logos of an organization in an advertisement is a dead give away. Search for the represented organization on *Google* to check on the status of the arborist and his/her affiliation. Terms used in advertisements, such as **topping**, indicate that the company **does not** support scientifically proven professional standards of the tree care industry. Membership in an organization and arborist certification are not the same.
- *Prioritize* work and prune (if warranted) according to the proper season, which may vary among species and the pruning objective. Certain trees are susceptible to insect attacks during warmer months. However hazardous situations may need to be corrected as soon as possible, regardless of season.
- A tree service should obey safety laws. Look for the use of required personal protective equipment (PPE) that must include hard hat, eye, and ear protection.
- Climbing spikes should not be used for tree pruning. Trained tree climbers should be proficient in working with ropes and saddles to avoid damaging trees with spikes.
- Tree workers should perform according to the International Society of Arboriculture's Best Management Practices and the American National Standard Institute's A300 Pruning Standards.
- Tree services should be insured with both liability and workman's' compensation.
- Consultants should be insured with professional liability.
- A low price may not represent informed decision making and could result in creating more risks and loss of property.

Bill Spiewak lives and works in Santa Barbara, California where he owned and operated a tree service for over twenty five years. He now operates a consulting practice as a Registered Consulting Arborist #381 with the American Society of Consulting Arborists, a Board Certified Master Arborist #310B with the International Society of Arboriculture and instructor of Arboriculture at Santa Barbara City College.