

That Healthy-Looking Tree Is Dying

Written by Jeff Shimonski, BT Contributor
October 2018

Incompetent maintenance can be a killer



I've assessed the health and stability of thousands of trees over the years. I've benefited from a career in the horticulture industry because knowing a tree's characteristics or species profile often gives me visual clues when I'm looking at it from a distance. I can tell when something's off. The color of the foliage may not be right for the time of year or the tree has accumulated small dead-branch ends on one of its sides.

Many of my projects have taken me onto college and university campuses, or to the properties of private schools. They might even be campuses I'm visiting for reasons other than work. But one glaring reality really stands out for me: some of the most egregious tree abuse -- and in some cases, the worst tree maintenance to be found -- can be seen on the campuses of learning institutions.

One incident really stands out. A number of years ago I'd just completed my site work evaluating the trees for a new development on the property of a "high-end" private school. I was walking back to my car and discussing the project with a manager of the school.

Then a tree off in the distance caught my eye and I said to the manager that it would be a good idea for me to inspect that tree based on what I was seeing. I explained my concerns and

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suggested we walk over and have a look together. There was a noticeable reluctance since school was in session and the area around the tree was in a fenced-in playground.

There were little kids inside the play area and I couldn't disturb them, so I didn't enter. Instead, I viewed the tree from about 20 feet away and was appalled by what I saw. I pointed out that improper pruning cuts over time had caused extensive decay in the tree's branches and trunk. The manager insisted, however, that the tree must be in good condition since its foliage looked great and the canopy was full and providing shade to the children inside the playground.

The manager was trying to end the visit and get me to leave, so I said I knew it wasn't within the scope of my work, but that he needed to close that playground and get a proper tree risk assessment as soon as possible by a competent professional. That tree had to be removed! There were little children playing underneath the canopy of a sick tree five or six days a week.

The manager didn't want to hear it. All I could think of was a favorite comment from the TV medical doctor Greg House when he'd call someone an idiot. The phrase just popped into my head.

Well, they reluctantly did have me assess the tree and write a report, and the tree was finally removed. Yet I was shocked that such an expensive institution would have such crappy tree maintenance, and it could be seen throughout the campus.

I've since learned that crappy tree maintenance is the norm for many educational facilities. Last month I was evaluating trees on another campus when a teacher noticed me at work and came out to ask me what I was doing. I explained that I was inspecting trees and that I had permission to be onsite.

I then asked the teacher if biology was taught in the school. The answer was that they only had grades K-8. I wasn't quite sure what was implied but explained that all the trees along the area where the cars were parked had had all their roots cut off on one side, right up to the trunk, and that these trees were likely to fail in a strong or perhaps not too strong wind.

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A number of the trees were already showing signs of damage; there was a dearth of any healthy-looking foliage in the canopy. I asked if anyone in the school had noticed the root damage, since they parked their cars there every day during the school term.

Perhaps I was a bit brusque since the teacher stalked off. I was left wondering about the serious void in students' education if biology, critical thinking, and risk assessment aren't taught, or even remotely understood by the management team in an educational institution.

I remember growing up here in Miami when we students would always gravitate to campus trees for their shade. I guess at the schools I attended all those trees now are gone, probably due to potential liability issues. What a shame. A little critical thinking might equate crappy and low-cost tree maintenance to probable tree failure.

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