

Hazardous Trees: The Second Storm

By Cass Turnbull

Don't Panic - Get a Tree Risk Assessment

I have been paying attention to trees and tree related issues for over twenty-five years, which is how long it's been since I started PlantAmnesty, a Seattle based organization to end tree topping. Since then some things have changed and others have not. In that score of years, Seattleites have weathered three '100 year storms' the latest of which occurred this December (needless to say, we've stopped calling them that). Back then it was not uncommon for media horticulturists to recommend tree topping, and the evening news to air post-storm segments that recommended tree topping as a way to make trees safer. It took a lot of letter-writing, but the 'corporate culture' of the newsrooms seems to have changed. It now includes the NO TOPPING message and reflects a more sophisticated understanding of 'tree failure', as it called in the business. And these days, we are apt to hear a bit about the predisposing factors, things like saturated soils followed by strong winds that cause trees to go down.

Still, the arborists and tree lovers I know are complaining about 'the second storm'. That's what we call it when the nervous citizens engage in tree topping, still widely practiced across the state and the world, and unnecessary removal of perfectly good trees--the ones that just proved themselves strong by withstanding the big blow. It is as if you decided to give up driving because a friend of yours got in an auto accident. The better solution is to recommit driving defensively, buckle up, and get a car with an air bag.

The reasonable reaction to concerns of tree safety is to hire a qualified arborist (the key word here is 'qualified') to do a Tree Risk Assessment.

After this last big blow, I asked some of the PlantAmnesty arborists a few questions, the answers to which you may find interesting. They said that most trees that failed (blew down, broken limbs or trunk failure) had defects and probably 50% could have been foretold had a full 'risk assessment' been done. Some of the common predisposing factors are: root rots, narrow branch attachments (with 'included bark'), compromised roots due to construction damage (a patio, a driveway, a new building development occurring within the last 7 years), trees newly exposed to wind stresses, and species with certain characteristic weaknesses. The knowledge that topping is a cause of hazard trees, not the cure,

seems not to have reached many parts of the state. Topping is itself one of the predisposing factors since it causes trunks to rot out and the new limbs that result are often weakly attached and will break out many years later when they are heavy and can do damage. Many of the tree tops that blew out in the Inaugural Day storm did so because the trees were topped after the Columbus Day storm. There are not a lot of things you can do in your life to cause great physical harm or death--but drunk driving and tree topping are two.

One improvement that has occurred during the last twenty years is the creation of a 'pruning code'. It is published by the American National Standards Institute. They are the ANSI A-300 pruning



standards and they should be referenced by homeowners, arborists and organizations whenever tree work is being bid. It is a huge step in the direction of fraud prevention.

Tree Risk Assessment is a newly emerging methodology, and accuracy is highly dependant on the experience and training of the arborist. Unfortunately some things haven't changed a lot since 1987. Although Seattle has gained many more highly qualified tree companies, the majority of people in the 'tree business' in Washington state and the nation have no formal training and just make it up as they go along. Many of them, including several large, successful business use scare tactics to get people to 'prune' or remove perfectly sound trees. You need nothing more than your \$80 business license to start your own tree business. In fact, more credentials are required to be a hairdresser, than to assess the safety of an 80 foot, 200-year old tree. The word 'arborist' means roughly 'tree person', and is not like the word 'doctor'. It is more like the word 'landscaper'. Anybody can call themselves an arborist.

Luckily for all of us, since 1987, the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) has instituted a testing program for arborists and you can be assured of a certain level of technical, science-based knowledge by hiring an 'ISA Certified' Arborist (<http://www.isaarbor.com/findArborist/findarborist.aspx> and <http://www.dnr.wa.gov/wcfc/treecare>). But in my opinion, of those people, only a percentage will have the needed years of experience to properly weigh the relative risks involved when assessing a tree. In truth, a tree is rarely either 'completely safe' or 'an imminent hazard' as we would like. It will probably have some defects and lie somewhere on a continuum between the two extremes. New arborists, like new 'med' students, are apt to see serious conditions where only minor ones exist. All of this tends to lead people to want to do their own Tree Risk Assessment which is about as wise as being your own doctor. I suggest you take the time and trouble to hunt for a good arborist. Be willing to do what it takes to get them to your property, and ask for a COMPLETE (more expensive \$400-\$500) risk assessment (instead of the cheaper "visual assessment" \$150-\$200), lest they miss one of the more hidden indicators. Start with the ISA list of Certified Arborists; ask your local City Arborist or Park Department head if they know someone to recommend (unless you live in one of those cities like Aberdeen or Toppenish where the city officials are actually topping all the city trees!). The more years your arborist has picking up after storms, the more likely he/she will have the right balance of field experience and book learning. Be patient, it will be months before the good guys dig out of the backlog of work left by this storm. Unless your tree is newly leaning, has heaved the ground or is dead, you are probably in no immediate danger. Try to get an arborist in the off season (early winter before the storms, or the summer lull, Aug-Sept). Like all good trades people they have a lot of work already. Be patient and persistent. If you live far away from qualified arborists, get together with some of your neighbors to get an arborist out to do several evaluations in the same day or days--making it worthwhile for them to travel. And you might try bribery, like putting the arborist and spouse up in your local B&B. If you live way, way too far away, you will have to act as your own 'doctor' and read up on Risk Assessment, previously known as Hazard Tree Evaluation. PlantAmnesty and the National Arbor Day Foundation have literature on this topic. And finally, I would ask that people respect the skill, bravery and knowledge that it takes to be a real arborist. I was surprised to hear that customers still balk at the rates of arborists (\$80-\$100/hour for regular tree work, twice that for hazard tree work such as is done

after a storm, and \$100/hour for Assessments). These same people don't bat an eyelash when the plumber's house call costs a similar amount. The downside risk for a plumbing problem is sewage in your bathtub. In the tree business, the downside risk is a crushed house, or severely injured person. There are no small mistakes in the tree business. Each day the workers put their lives on the line. In the last year alone, I personally know of four arborists who have suffered major multiple injuries-head trauma, broken pelvis, broken ribs, vertebra, collar bones, and the like. Workers insurance and liability cost are huge. Tree work is among the most dangerous of professions -similar to logging, underwater welding, and explosives experts. Like an athlete, a tree climber is old when he/she is forty. The job is hugely physically demanding. But by then, hopefully, the arborist will have acquired that rare body of knowledge that allows him/her to provide accurate risk assessments, a job which requires and almost equal amount of courage. Think of the doctor who gives his patient a physical and issues a clean bill of health only to have him drop dead the next week. Tree Risk Assessments are an even more imperfect science, and yet arborists are willing to make judgment calls. A good arborist, one with sound judgment, training and years of experience is a rare commodity. Such a person has both a love of trees and a respect of the damage they can do. You will not be encouraged to keep a tree which is unsafe, nor told to remove one that is sound.

Resources

PlantAmnesty Referral Service:

206-7839813
info@plantamnesty.org
www.plantamnesty.org

ISA website;

www.isaarbor.com/findarborist/findarborist.aspx

DNR Link:

www.dnr.wa.gov/ResearchScience/ForestryForestEcology/Pages/Home.aspx

For A Risk Assessment:

Qualified Arborists can be located by contacting the PlantAmnesty Referral Service 206-783-9813 or info@plantamnesty.org or go to www.isaarbor.com