

Explanation of a Risk Evaluation for Trees

The last issue focused on trees that pose risks to the general public, to workers and clients. Flawed or dead trees may leave property owners vulnerable to expensive, negligence lawsuits. It is important to remove dead trees or trees that are substantially weakened by decay, especially when these trees might fall onto a local roadway or other public area. It is the property owner's duty to inspect his or her trees to insure they do not fall and cause harm.

The question that naturally arises from this discussion is: "I have a duty to inspect my trees but when I do, what do I look for? How do I evaluate a tree for potential for risk?" Generally, trees that present a "risk of harm" the general public are undesirable, but it is also undesirable to cut down healthy and beneficial trees! This can be quite a predicament!

The first thing to do is create an **action plan** for your company to follow on every purchased or developed property. This action plan should, at the very least, map out a procedure for evaluating trees within a striking distance of any public area. It should document what is being looked for and how the company will deal with trees that present unreasonable risk.

The next step in the action plan is to perform a **Visual Tree Assessment (VTA)**. This assessment must be made on site, person to tree. Trees near a roadway cannot be assessed from a downtown office, from an aerial photo, from client hearsay or from a helicopter. Instead, inspections should be completed by physically walking the area and scrutinizing the trees! Remember a 100-foot tall tree fifty feet deep on the lot could easily fall and hit the roadway or public area.

The VTA should include an inventory of trees in critical areas that, if they failed, could harm the general public. This inventory should include species, diameter at breast height (dbh), condition of the trees, and possibly a maintenance plan. It is advised that the inventory sheets include a check box for "immediate removal recommended" to categorize dead trees and trees with very obvious decayed areas that threaten the public areas.

During an inventory trees will be documented as the area is physically explored, but what exactly is being looked for? This question will take more than this article to answer so please realize the following



Chuck Miller of Vine & Branch Inc. performs a Risk Evaluation

guidelines are preliminary and further education will be needed to truly perform a thorough VTA.

The process of VTA should include an assessment of:

1. The ground around the root flare (area where trunk connects to the roots)
2. The root flare itself (sometimes looks like an "elephant's foot")
3. The bole or trunk of the tree (also sometimes called the stem)
4. The limb junctions (where limbs branch off of the trunk)
5. The scaffold branches (big limbs which make up the crown of the tree)
6. The branches (attached to scaffolds)
7. The twigs of the tree

Watch this column in the next issue for information on how to perform a risk evaluation for each of these tree parts.

Note on the Author

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