



Living with Large Trees

Recently there has been a spate of large branches falling on yards, streets and, unfortunately, houses. Neighbors have asked me what, if anything, can be done to prevent this, so here are a few tips you might find helpful.

While wind and ice can cause major damage, in my experience, most trees shed large branches in the early morning or late afternoon under perfectly calm conditions. This shedding frequently coincides with periods of prolonged drought and within one to three days after sudden heavy rainfall. Trees under drought stress will 'pull' moisture up from their roots quickly after a rain event, and because water is heavy, their major branches, particularly the weakest ones, break suddenly under the added weight.

Proper thinning and trimming to reduce extra weight from the ends of branches is crucial. Limbs that are damaged or rubbing against other limbs invariably decline and should be removed. The strength of a limb depends in large measure to its branching angle. The narrower, more V shaped the angle, i.e. from 5 to 35 degrees, the less load capable is the limb. Even so, removal may not be the best or only option, particularly with large trees. Installing steel cables aids in the distribution of weight and stress between limbs and can produce an overall stronger tree.

Tall trees are prone to lightning strikes. My trees have been hit at least three times during the past 20 years, and with the exception of some dead squirrels, nothing serious has resulted. Nevertheless, the force and heat of a lightning strike can cause catastrophic damage that may not be immediately visible but that may lead to the death or failure of major limbs years later.

Healthy mature trees are no accident. They are the result of thoughtful management. As an arborist, nothing is more distressing than to see trees removed needlessly or trimmed improperly. My best advice is to be skeptical of anyone who first approaches you about your trees. When your trees require care that you are not able to provide yourself, contact a qualified professional, someone with credentials attesting to both their education and work experience, i.e. a nursery certificate, a horticultural degree or, better yet, an arborist certification. Never hire anyone who cannot furnish references and proof of liability insurance.

Trees are an important resource. We rely on them for food, shelter and the very air we breathe. High among the reasons many of us choose to live in Lake Highlands is the abundance of mature trees. Our trees provide beauty, increase property values and reduce energy costs. They are a community asset, years in the making and one deserving of our pride and care.