

National Arborist Association

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Do You Have a Tree at Risk?

If you are the owner or caretaker of large shade trees, you benefit from their shade and beauty. You may benefit from your trees in other ways, too. Their shade or protection may lower your heating or cooling costs substantially, they may buffer noise from a nearby street, and they may contribute significantly to the appraised value of your home.

But tree ownership has a cost, too. Trees require periodic checkups and preventative maintenance to stay in top health. Trees sometimes fail, and sometimes that failure can be predicted. If your tree fails and causes damage, and its failure could have reasonably been prevented, you can be held liable.

The process of determining the likelihood of failure is called hazard assessment, and with a little practice you can become good enough at it to at least recognize when you need to call an expert. Winter is generally a good time to do this, because most defects are more visible.

It is generally accepted that there are two levels of defect, moderate risk and high risk. Moderate risk defects are ones that may worsen over time or fail under significant strain, like an unusually strong wind. Combinations of moderate defects may cause more immediate tree failure. High risk defects are indicators that the tree has failed or is in imminent danger of failing.

There are seven categories of defect.

- 1 Dead wood - can fail at any time. Branches that have broken off and lodged are especially dangerous.
- 2 Rib cracks - longitudinal splits that have opened or closed, where the wood is raised along the crack, indicating that the tree has tried to close over the wound. These are often associated with internal decay or root damage, and can be moderate to high risk defects.
- 3 Shear cracks - longitudinal splits that form in the center of leaning trees, and tend to be high risk defects.
- 4 Tension cracks - horizontal or tangential cracks, and indicators that the tree above is moving. They are catastrophic.
- 5 Seams - they indicate a past rib crack or internal decay that the tree has repaired.
- 6 Weak unions - these are generally V-shaped tree forks where there isn't a strong union of wood fiber holding the branches together.
- 7 Decay - this category includes wood that is deteriorated or missing (hollow). A general rule is that a tree requires one inch of sound wood for every six inches of diameter to be moderate risk. Heavy branches with decay are high risk. A tree with an open cavity that is one-third or more of its circumference is high risk.

Other factors, such as cankers, poor tree architecture, root problems, or dieback, may be predictors of tree failure. If you suspect that your tree might contain defects, call a professional arborist who can more fully evaluate your tree and recommend ways to reduce your risk. For more information or to locate a professional arborist in your area, call the National Arborist Association at 1-800-733-2622, or visit their Website at www.natlarb.com.

Note: Pictures of various trees and diseases are available on request via e-mail. (Mohan@natlarb.com)