

VitaCare: A Program That Works

“A Stitch In Time Saves Nine”



A typical Mid-South homeowner frequently spends hundreds of dollars a year to keep their grass lush, green, and weed-free . . . and sometimes with only marginal return on that investment. Yet far fewer homeowners ever consider spending even a fraction of those dollars on a program that focuses on retaining the appearance and vitality of irreplaceable trees and plant material.

with colleagues across the country, professional continuing education and years of in-the-field experience.

tions. And only then can the appearance, vitality, and value in landscape investments be optimized on any site.



Following this initial evaluation, subsequent component parts of VitaCare may include applications of custom blended seasonal fertilization, restoration of soil mycorrhizal presence, preventative disease control, and appropriate insect control(s) based on plant damage thresholds.

VitaCare is and has been now for thirty-plus years the name for our program of plant health care. Years ago I realized that the design and implementation of any truly **on-target** program must rely on solid diagnostics, including initial soil and/or tissue testing. Since then our VitaCare program has constantly changed and evolved to incorporate the latest information gained through regular networking

Now in these last years Morgan Tree will only very rarely and only under unusual circumstances move to initiate a new site plant care program *without* this critical diagnostic work. At least minimal soil testing. Happily, while the cost of basic initial testing is usually minimal, it does serve a vital role in keeping us relevant with our treatments and applica-

As implied above, no two programs are exactly alike since each one is designed from site-specific information. But even so, one of us will be on a site three to four times a year or after any phone call, to make an inspection survey of the plant material. Diagnostic or inspection site visits to existing VitaCare clients are always free. This is a great way to catch potential problems before they sneak up, becoming expensive and devastating.

Yet far fewer homeowners ever consider spending . . . dollars on a program that focuses on retaining the appearance and vitality of irreplaceable trees and plant material.

MORGAN TREE SERVICE, INC.
THE “VITACARE” COMPANY

Tree Times

Taking Care Of Our Trees



Much as I am *not* a fan of the winter months, I have to concede that there are things going on then that don't happen at any other time of the year. Yes, it's important to know that the winter months are in fact a critical preparation time for the flush of growth and green activity that is set to burst upon the scene just as soon as the days get longer and the average temperatures rise in the spring.

As I have driven around the city since last fall and thru the winter in the last few months the hundreds of plastic bags

stacked on curbs and filled with raked leaves have been impossible to ignore. In our time raking up the leaves is of course the culturally correct thing to do and moreover, our usual love affair with green lawns requires it. But there is a slight rub: the trees would actually prefer it if we didn't bother with that traditional fall project. For them it would be much better if last season's old necrotic leaf material would be left on site to compost and add to what would ultimately result in a rich organically alive top soil that encouraged aeration, water dispersal and a happy

root expansion. But that actually happens in only a small minority of cases.

The typical Memphis soil is clay, a small-pored soil type that tends to absorb water slowly but once taken up, holds onto it tightly in much the same way that a cotton string will pull water upward along its length when one end is immersed in a glass of water. This water holding characteristic encourages root rot. Moreover, when combined with the usual lack of organic

content in manicured lawns, it tends to also discourage the presence of mycorrhizae, a universally occurring fungal organism that normally associates with plant roots in a mutually beneficial relationship when the soil is undisturbed, such as it is in natural forests. When clay has an organic content lower than three (3%) percent the root-mass-increasing mycorrhizal spores tend to dissipate. This in turn decreases plant vitality and increases its susceptibility to drought and insect attacks in the seasons

immediately ahead.

Mulching your leaves and leaving them in place is preferred to complete removal. Also, it is a good idea to periodically let us get a soil report for you. This will let you check *not only* the soil pH (most deciduous trees like a pH range between 5.6 and 6.2) but also the levels of macro-elements and the percentage of soil organic content.

If your report indicates a low level of organic content (below 3%) in areas near

important large trees, one option would be to consider having ecto-mycorrhizal spores injected back into those vital root growth areas. Another would be to expand the radius of mulched areas around key trees. A third strategy is increasing soil aeration by way of a pattern of augered holes (2" wide X 14" deep) on three foot centers under the dripline (s). Fill the holes 80% to the top with ProMix, small pea gravel and/or coarse sand. Then top them off with a little dirt and a plug of grass if appropriate.

From My Journal: Spring 2010

In the Fall, 2009 letter I began the story of our 40th wedding anniversary trip to France last September. Here is the promised completion of that tale.

In Carcassonne in south-central France there is one of the most impressive eleventh century castles in existence. Someone called it the Crème de la crème of castle touring ... and I believe it. We were there for three days in a wonderful B&B overlooking the monolithically glowing orange-colored stone of the castle walls at sunset. Perfect! And our host there, Dany Albarel, was the definitive refutation of the idea that the French are not friendly to Americans.

In Chinon we bicycled over narrow roads winding through glorious winefields that seems to go on forever, here and there surrounding classic little storybook villages amidst their ancient vines. At the chateau high above Chinon we parked our bikes and had an inspiring tour and history lesson centered around a French national hero, the 17-year-old Jeanne D'Arc, (sounds like "John Dark") who we had previously only known as Joan of Arc and who had arrived there somewhat inauspiciously in 1429 to seek a meeting with the disenfranchised Charles VII. Within two years of that meeting right there at that still visible huge crumbled stone fireplace high up in the old wall above where we stood and also within several months of his subsequent coronation, the short-lived French heroine was burned at the stake by disenfranchised English

sympathizers in the north for mostly political reasons, not because she claimed to hear from God as my wife had thought.

Marie, our young lecturing guide was obviously immersed in and in love with her subject. At the end of our extended



hour and a half tour, which included lots of Q&A, Becky and I felt as though we'd had a full course in medieval French culture and intrigues. I could also imagine that my previous reading of Ken Follett's Pillars Of The Earth somehow primed me for my rather eerie and almost visceral "sensing" of the centuries of history and human drama lived out all around us and right there at our feet as we sat in awe in the plazas of Strasbourg, Reims and Soissons or in the quiet darkened interiors of so many old cathedrals and churches.

In Sarlat (pronounced Sar'la with emphasis on the "Sar" and a silent "t") we could not flag a taxi and so trudged from the train station almost three very uphill kilometers along the nonexistent shoul-

der of a windy narrow road with our gear in tow. With the wind of each passing car, my wife would turn to breathlessly assert to me that they're all thinking: "Crazy Americans." Turned out the proprietor had previously told us in an email that "...if you're a walker, it's easy." By the time we got up to the otherwise wonderful B&B (Mas de la Peche) I had to restrain my huffing and puffing wife from administering unsolicited physical violence to the head of the otherwise very friendly and welcoming proprietress. We thereafter referred to that magical lodging as "our place on the mountain." Sarlat was one of four places over our travels that we rented bicycles. They proved delightful and vastly increased our range and touring capabilities without the insulating effects of a car. We could nap on the lush green grass of a park and then get up and ride to the next spot. But on two occasions we were obliged to push them uphill from town and back to our B&B via an even steeper but less lengthy "short cut."

With only six days left in our schedule and having shifted from an expired rail pass to a rental car, we drove back across the central French countryside to the coastal area of Normandy. In all our previous trips, we had not made Normandy and the famous beaches and cemeteries of World War II a part of our



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plan. I did not want to commit the same omission again and indeed felt some sort of visceral need to visit these sites before I died.

After a lunch in Verdun and then en-route westward we stopped briefly in Reims to visit the famous cathedral there, one of the oldest in the country. Then the waning hours of the day occasioned an overnight stop in Soissons, where we were wonderfully hosted by Mario and Sylvie, who told us that we were the first Americans to stay at their B&B home since they had opened the year before. They were most gracious to us, seeming to be delighted with our decision to spend a night in their upstairs bedroom overlooking a splendid garden. It was there in their enclosed garden, featuring plums and currants, that Mario invited us for aperitifs before we struck out on foot to the restaurant he had recommended for dinner. Mario is an amateur historian and he pulled out all of his WWII pictorial books on the campaigns and hardship there in his home district around Soissons. As with others of our friendly B&B hosts, we promised to send photos and greeting via email.

Near the end of the following day we arrived along the Normandy coast in the vicinity of Port du Bessin and Omaha Beach. We spent the rest of the day locating a place to lay our heads and finally found just the spot, an old anciently-walled French farm lot with house and barns, out buildings and original well all enclosed. We shared a toilet and douche (shower) there with two hilarious older women from Texas.

The next day, after a magical and also shared breakfast in the farmhouse, we drove almost literally across the road to the beach and American cemetery. Omaha Beach is vast and starkly flat and wide open. I saw again the vulnerability of it that I sensed in my viewings of the early movie scenes in "Saving Private Ryan." The beach is overlooked from the shore side by a imposing bluff whose slopes are now almost entirely covered in dense over-

growth and tangles of dense foliage. Here and there a trail is maintained by a bureau of the American government to allow visitors to descend from the heights of the bluff down to the sands of that infamous beach. I stood in a surprising and uniquely reverent awe as I gazed down and then from the water, back up, realizing the hell that must have happened here that purchased the life we enjoy today.

Back at the top we toured the American Cemetery there and gained a new insight into some poignant detail and stories as we tagged on to a Stephen Ambrose group tour composed of visitors who had relatives that landed there in 1944. The leader of the tour, a writing partner of the late Stephen Ambrose, assured me that we were welcome in particular since we recognized (by an Eagle, Globe and Anchor on his belt buckle) that we were brother Marines.

From Omaha we traveled on southwest toward a place that my wife has always wanted to visit: Mont St.Michel. This spot on the coast has been until very recently a "high-tide island" that since the seventy century has been the mountain-top site of an old Benedictine Abbey. The abbey is still active today and we somehow arrived there on the exact



weekend of its thirteen hundredth anniversary celebration. As we toured the abbey we could not help but notice the scores of crew that hauled in miles of cable, lights, tripods, sound equipment, etc. When we asked what was going on, we were informed that in two days, on that Sunday, French National Television was going to broadcast a special 1300th anniversary celebration across the country from that spot.

Staying overnight on Mont St.Michel proper is almost impossible to expect unless reservations have been made far (read "months and years") in advance. But a tip from a shopkeeper in the eight-foot wide medieval stone streets and a subsequent inquiry gained us the last room with a stellar view whose former reservation for the night had canceled just the hour before.



From Mont St.Michel back to Paris, where our encore experience with bicycles waited for us in a shop lo-

cated for us by a Paris native, Isabelle Roux. Isabelle took up our case when we were considering renting two of the street side public bicycles provided by the city of Paris. But we learned from her that this is likely not the preferred way when you expect to keep and use the bikes for a full day (24 hours) or more. Right there on the street she called her husband, who looked in the Paris yellow pages and located the closest rental shop. Then she provided us transfer by transfer directions so we could arrive via the Metro. We thanked her profusely and she exclaimed "Oh no! I am just honored that you have decided to visit my city.

So in the beginning we launched this significant journey as a metaphoric reprise of our 40th wedding anniversary celebration. Indeed, celebration was our theme. And every place along the way, whether new for us or revisited, was fresh and delightful in its own special way. But God seemed to do even more for us as he endorsed for us at least three times that theme of celebration. He landed us not just once but three times right into the middle of three big parties and celebrations; one a millennial celebration of a breath-taking cathedral in Strasbourg, then a binational celebration of the culture in the Alsace region and finally that remarkable 1300th anniversary celebration at the still-active abbey at Mont St. Michel. Wow! How could we not feel special and blessed?



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**THE "VITACARE" COMPANY
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Bamboo??



Bamboo! Wow! And it's a grass too! But all I'd ever heard about bamboo is that keeping it under control . . . think "Kudzu" here . . . is a real pain, a full-time job. I'd even heard horror stories of how it can get away from you. I knew I didn't need that because I've got plenty else to do without fighting a runaway plant from Hades.

But last year my wife and I began an on-going discussion about how best to create an approximate 200' long privacy and noise screen along the west side of our property. On that side is a stand of mostly oak trees about thirty to forty feet wide. But in the winter you can see right through to the property next door. So all that led to asking a few more questions and then going to Google . . . what would we do without Google? We learned that per dollar invested there may be no better and quicker privacy screen in an understory shady area. And we learned that there are also two basic kinds of bamboo: the clumping kind and the running kind. Within those major classes are many cultivars with different sunlight requirements, cold hardiness, maturity height, and foliage characteristics. So what about these two main types? Turns out they behave very differently that begs for a decision at the very front end of the project. Clumping types do just that; they clump and stay confined to a relatively small area without posing the

invasive dilemmas into surrounding areas where it may not be desired. While usually cheaper, they don't screen as much area. Clump types usually spread only a few inches a year and they come in a variety of profiles and maturity heights, even up to thirty feet.

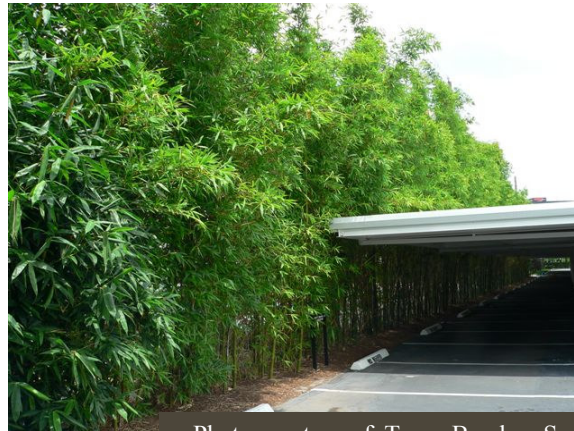


Photo courtesy of Texas Bamboo Society

The second type, running bamboo, can spread rapidly in every direction by way of their rhizome root systems. Running bamboo will provide a visual and noise barrier much faster with less cost, even though the per/gallon price from the supplier may be higher. The downside to the running type is the need of a well placed rhizome barrier to control the lateral invasion. The people who tell those horror stories about out-of-control bamboo are probably the same ones who neglected to install those necessary rhizome containment barriers. Such a barrier entails (usually) a trench

to about 24" to 28" depth into which a root barrier is installed vertically. Bio fabrics can be used for this purpose. Also plastic, when properly installed and intact, will work. Jim Crowder of Dan West Garden Center also cited the success of 24" wide aluminum roofing flashing. Install the material in the trench sloping away from the plantings and backfill. Leave an above ground "lip" of two (2") inches to prevent the rhizomes from "leaping over."

So if I want a fast growth along my 200 linear feet I will have to do a little extra work . . . okay, maybe a little more than a little. But in short order (two years?) I can accomplish my objective of a visual and noise barrier a lot faster with the running type. Guess I'll just have to rent a trencher and buy a big roll of aluminum flashing along with my "psychotic grass." Oh . . . and maybe get a good muscle relaxer too.



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