Risk Assessment: Catching Trouble Before It Catches You

It's likely that sometime in the last few years you have driven along some street and with shock and awe seen the destructive impact of a large tree that has fallen through the middle of someone's house.

At the end of January I am conducting an all-day seminar at the Botanic Garden on the topic of Tree Risk Assessment. It's content will be geared primarily for tree care practitioners here in the Mid-South. At our last annual ASCA conference in Tucson in early December '08 the topic of the all day Pre-Conference seminar there was also Tree Risk Assessment. And in one of my past newsletters Tree Risk Assessment was the subject. So what's all the fuss about 'Tree Risk Assessment'?

Maybe the best answer is to say that when trees that are genuine candidates for this work are ignored, there can be coming down the pike a bitter and expensive price for someone to pay in property damage, potential personal injury and/or, worst case, death. Memphis is a city that values its large trees, as it should. Towering oaks provide value and amenities for us in a number of important ways. But just like people, big trees get old and with age comes various levels of instability and susceptibility to a veritable buffet of potential hazards and flaws.

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Most of the time these maladies and flaws are accompanied by characteristic telltales. There are several possibilities here. First, it's important to know that the presence of those telltales does not automatically and infallibly indicate a doomed tree; that is, it may be flawed but not critically so. Secondly and contrary-wise, it is possible, but less probable , that a telltale-free tree is also a candidate for some form of risk aba tement. But it is always true that telltales should be identified, monitored, and possibly evaluated rather than just ignored. And further, a simple sounding with a rubber mallet or plastic hammer can often identify certain types of concerns even in a non-symptomatic patient.

A few years back I was invited to a property to look at and offer my best thoughts about a large oak that was alleged to be in decline. The oak was over 36" in diameter and located in the middle of a wood deck adjacent to the homeowner's swimming pool. My client had been concerned about the tree's health based on the look of a few leaves. But otherwise the tree seemed just fine. So he was a bit perplexed when, simply out of practiced habit, I brought out my mallet and went around the base of his oak, tapping at the lower trunk just above deck level. It was only to be a quick and simple little check that would take no more than half a minute. But when I heard a distinctively disturbing hollow drum-like sound, I told him that I wanted to go one step further. I went to my vehicle and brought back a 12" diagnostic bit and drilled into the wood. The bit went into the wood only two or three inches before it collapsed rapidly into an interior hollow. Next I inserted a 30" long small-diameter steel probe into the small drill hole I had just made. It went in all the way to the hilt. I told the owner that unfortunately he should forget about the leaves and the top condition, now a moot point, and schedule a removal crew as soon as possible. Happily, after recovering from his shock, he *did* schedule a crew. A $1,900.00 removal saved him multiple thousands in property damage and possibly worse.

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That sort of dramatic story doesn't happen every day … but it *does* happen.

The accompanying drawing here is interesting in its implications. The critical issue with hollow trees is not just whether it is hollow but rather how severely so.