

About Trees: Inevitable approaches for venerable tree

Age, development tax East Memphis elm

By Fred Morgan

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The other day, I returned to the site of a sad but inevitable loss. And I use the term "loss" in a progressive and future sense, because all of it -- the full impact of it -- has not yet come to pass.

At the entrance of an upscale gated property on an East Memphis street is an iconic American elm that was identified and marked as a historic tree at the time the development came to be about 30 years ago.

I returned to install a temporary seasonal "rain shield" over a gaping cavity that, without such a protection, would otherwise catch and retain massive amounts of water during the coming winter. It was installed in such a way as to permit easy removal for access to air and sunlight next year when spring rolls around.

It was installed after the recent removal of a large portion of the tree that would otherwise have posed a very destructive hazard to the gate, the gatehouse and traffic entering and exiting the property.

Three previously installed cables had to be cut to remove this flawed section, cables that likely had become the primary support of that section.

For at least a year before the work, concerns had been voiced about the approach of the inevitable, but the old elm was such an important tree on the site that many were reticent to acknowledge what had to be coming.

Last week, the crane crew that took out what might be termed the potentially lethal "Phase 1" appeared to do their work. People passing by stopped to sadly shake their heads, while a few others nodded their approval of the work. "There's a time for everything," someone said.

American elms are possibly the most common and most well-known of the native elms that are highly susceptible to the vascular wilt issue known as Dutch Elm Disease. However, this tree, which bears a marble plaque placed by the developer, was not a victim of that disease. Over the years, it had been injected with a fungicide that prevented the disease.

Instead, a progressive accumulation of other conditions, including age, soil restrictions and development had slowly taken their toll.

Just like people, trees finally get old and simply don't do anything as well as they once did. Growth rate slows, wounds heal less well, and sugar is metabolized less effectively.

For this venerable old elm, a second phase of dangerous limb removal is scheduled. Everyone hates to see the loss, to see the familiar landmark gone. But life is defined by change. Nothing lasts forever, and that fact may be a good thing, enhancing our appreciation of the beauty in our lives.

Certified arborist Fred Morgan of Cordova has owned and operated Morgan Tree Service since 1974. His column runs in Home & Garden once a month. Get more tree information at morgantreeservice.com.



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