

Learn how to evaluate tree trouble

By Fred Morgan
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"I really hate to think about losing that old oak, but at night, when the wind blows, it really scares me. What do you think we ought to do about it?"

That question comes up more often than you'd think.

Given the right conditions, any large tree growing near where people live is a potential hazard, and, therefore, a liability, even as it is an asset in other ways.

Over time, inherent physiological flaws, environmental issues, one-time events like lightning strikes and other problems can greatly exacerbate the normal everyday risk of living with trees.

Benjamin Franklin is said to be the originator of the "T-chart," a simple evaluation tool that aids decision making by sorting and grading assets and liabilities, advantages and disadvantages. In a somewhat similar way, many professional arborists are trained to conduct systematic "risk assessments" that facilitate a correct management decision about important and valuable landscape trees that have, over time, taken on some liability characteristics. There are even time-tested and standardized protocols for such assessments.

But aside from size and proximity itself, what are the signs, the telltales of an elevated-risk tree? Here are a few:

Large trees with shady, damp bases that begin to have strange-looking large, dark (brown-to-black) mushrooms or rusty-brown, hard, shelf-like formations on the lower trunk or the root flares near the ground. These can be classic signs of several types of root rot that can be complicit in the entire tree just falling over.

Large forks with deep "V" junctions. These are weak connectors. As time passes and weight is added above, these forks can separate just like the wishbone of Grandma's fried chicken. Winter ice and even the weight of additional rainwater on foliage can cause a failure.

Discolored and/or soft, flaky, mushy areas on a trunk. Such cankers and lesions

interrupt vascular function and are potential break points.

A hollow, drum-like sound when a trunk or large roots are struck with a sounding tool like a rubber mallet.

This is only a partial list of factors that indicate possible problems.

Any one of these problems, flaws or events can run the spectrum of minor to severe. Professional advice is often advised prior to any final management decision.

Even with healthy specimens, remember that your tree needs its water out there under the branches, not immediately around the trunk.

About Fred Morgan

Fred Morgan of Cordova has owned and operated Morgan Tree Service since 1974.

Since 1983, he has been involved in arboricultural consulting, diagnostics and problem solving. He works with architects, builders, site developers and private property owners on issues of tree preservation, valuation and risk. He is a certified arborist and a registered consulting arborist with the American Society of Consulting Arborists. He publishes a quarterly newsletter for clients and friends. Get more tree info at morgantreeservice.com or 756-9893. His column will appear in Home & Garden once a month.



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