

How to Manage the Menace in Your Backyard



In a paradoxical twist of human nature, the fear of calamity often motivates people to take steps that end up causing it.

That ash tree in your backyard, for instance – the one overhanging your house neighbour commented that the canopy is looking yellow and thin, suggested it might have fallen prey to the Emerald Ash Borer, a beetle decimating ash trees across North America. Well you've read enough to know means trouble.

Or maybe it's the majestic maple reaching across the driveway where you park your car. You're convinced that the powerful storms visiting your neighbourhood lately have targeted it for damage.

Yes, time to do something, and do it fast, before you tempt fate.

But pause a moment.

Your next decision – who you hire to do the job – could be the most critical one of all.

Tree cutting is a dangerous occupation, and here's proof: The Ministry of Labour reports the past four years, nine people died and 67 were critically injured in this province while working on trees, as a result of unsafe work practices. One of the fallen, a 36-year-old tree-cutter Dunrobin, died at the scene as recently as July 2015.

Trees have no shortage of hazards associated with them – beetles, storms, brittle branches, propensity of birds, raccoons and other wildlife to make trees their home – and a compromised tree is full of surprises. Professional arborists rely on knowledge gained through formal training programs and field experience to anticipate many of them, and to identify risks before making the cut.

The detailed diagnostic process they undertake is especially important with infested trees, whose limbs and trunks break in unpredictable ways.

The important thing for homeowners to know is that not everyone who claims to be a qualified arborist in fact is one. Surges in demand, the result of pests like the Emerald Ash Borer, tornadoes and inclement weather, combined with long waiting periods for tree trimming and removal, given rise to unqualified people promoting themselves to do the work.

The International Society of Arboriculture warns homeowners about the dangers of hiring workers without experience who buy chainsaws and market themselves as professional tree trimmers what even certified and veteran arborists call a dangerous profession. Fly-by-night operators eager to make a quick dollar close their eyes to the fact that tree cutting is a serious supported by colleges and private companies offering training and apprenticeship programs.

Doing it right involves inspecting trunks, limbs, root systems and canopy with a practiced eye. It involves making a detailed plan that assesses how each successive cut will affect safety. It involves wearing extensive safety gear, including chainsaw protection and a double harness system, and securing the chainsaw with a line in case it's dropped. It involves knowing what branches to leave until later to maintain the tree's stability, knowing when to hire a crane to deal with big limbs too dangerous to cut in any other way, and knowing the precise degree and angle of tension to apply so the tree will fall in the intended direction. Experienced arborists leave nothing to chance.

By contrast, unskilled and inexperienced workers substitute bravado and guesswork for knowledge and experience, putting themselves and their clients at enormous risk. That risk is amplified if homeowners make the ill-fated decision – my tree, my backyard, how difficult can it be – to do the job themselves.

Unconvinced? Google on “chainsaw injuries in Ontario” and stand back from the gush of catastrophe: the fatalities, the life-threatening cuts to arms and legs, the chainsaw blades embedded in neck and shoulders.

Not to mention property damage and liability.

As if death and injury isn't enough, additional risks affect homeowners and small business owners in another place where it hurts: your bank account.

“If you're having work that is risky done on your property, take the right steps to reduce the impact on your home,” advises Steve Kee, a director at the Insurance Bureau of Canada.

“By checking to see if the business is registered with the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, and if it carries workers' compensation on its employees, you're protecting yourself.”

If you hire an unqualified individual who does not have either WSIB or private liability insurance, and property damage occurs (a broken fence, a cracked hot tub), or an injury or fatality occurs involving the tree trimmer or anyone standing by, your homeowners insurance policy will be called on to cover certain costs; however, your coverage may not be adequate and your policy insufficient to cover all situations for which you may be legally responsible.

Health and safety, after all, isn't something others do for you. It is up to you as the person paying for the service to hire safety conscious workers, and to make sure the tree trimmer is protected.

What you can do to mitigate risk

The arborist profession is not regulated, which means the onus for hiring a reputable company and experienced tree cutter rests with you, the homeowner. Here are several ways you can look for barometers of competency:

- Inquire about the length of time the company or individual has been in this business.
- Request details on the company's and/or tree trimmer's health and safety record.
- Ask for a copy of the firm's WSIB clearance certificate number and other applicable liability insurance, and check to ensure it is in good standing. If you are hiring a self-employed individual, find out what type of insurance the worker has through the WSIB or through another insurance provider.
- Find out what licenses, qualifications or certifications the individual has for this work. (See below for a discussion on arborist certification.) What education and training, and in particular safety training, the individual has completed? Does the person have the

right skills for the job? There is a big difference between cutting a tree at ground level, and removing limbs from the canopy.

- Ask for references and call to inquire other clients were satisfied.
- Ask for written estimates from more than one company, bearing in mind that the right skills and equipment, and proper insurance, might cost more but is well worth the investment.



Does the arborist need to be certified?

Certification with the International Society of Arboriculture Ontario (ISAO), while a significant barometer of competency, is not a requirement.

But consider this. “Nine fatalities and 67 injuries in four years means 20 traumatic events are happening in someone's backyard every year,” says Stephen McQuigge, a member of the Board of Directors, ISAO.”

Consumers need to know who's in their backyard. They need to front-load the question, “Do you have the credentials to prove you're competent to perform this work? What is your knowledge, training and experience?”

When the fire department, police, EMS and MOL are standing in your back yard, it's a lousy time to figure out whether your contractor is insured and competent to perform the job.”

Another barometer of competency is completion of arboriculture programs and apprenticeships at Ontario colleges like Fleming College in Lindsay.

How to find a reputable tree cutter

- Begin your search in your community: ask your local garden centre who they recommend, or check with neighbours who have had work done and are satisfied.
- Check “Find a Certified Arborist” on the International Society of Arboriculture website (www.isaontario.com), under the tab, “For the Public.”
- Check the online yellow pages for specialists in tree care.
- Always follow up with the questions listed above.

If you have questions, please contact *the Ontario International Society of Arboriculture*:

**Ph. 1-888-463-2316 or 416-493-7022
Fax 1-855-329-4726 (1-855-FAX-ISAO)**

info@isaontario.com

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Heidi Croot is representing Workplace Safety & Prevention Services in this article, and is principal of Croot Communications (hcroot@xplornet.com).

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