

Inspect Your Trees

Winter's bare branches offer an opportunity to inspect your trees and evaluate whether they present a hazard. When a tree or branch lands on people or property, it can mean trouble.

In evaluating the hazard potential of a tree, identify potential targets and defects. Targets are objects or property that would be hit if the tree or limb falls. Common targets are houses, cars, and utility lines. It is especially critical to consider areas where people gather, such as pools, picnic tables, and decks. A defect is the condition that may cause the tree to fall or lose branches.

If a defect is suspected, a hazard tree evaluation should be undertaken by a trained professional arborist or urban forestry consultant. Every tree has the potential to fail, but while only a few do each year, it's important for property owners to regularly check their trees for defects.

Trees most likely to become hazards are those weakened by age, storms, fires, or other injuries. If such trees are planted near pedestrian or vehicular traffic or buildings, they can jeopardize safety.

Look in the crown of the tree for signs of low vigor, dead branches, wounds, or cracks. Fungus, mushrooms, or conks on or at the base of the trunk or large limbs indicate decay inside the tree. If a tree begins to suddenly lean, or if the ground around the tree starts to rise up, there is a strong likelihood that the tree is going to fall.

Construction activity near the root zone of large trees can have a detrimental effect on tree health. The damage can take several years to appear. If your trees have been topped (by a previous owner, of course), they are far more likely to become hazards, because they are vulnerable to column decay and branch loss.

And, some species are more prone to failure than others. Generally, fast-growing, soft-wooded trees like poplar and willow fail more often than slower-growing, hard-wooded trees like oaks and maples.

If the hazard is not imminent, consider moving the target. Although you can't move your house, sometimes a landscape feature, parking site, playground equipment, or picnic table can be moved out of the danger zone. Remove defective branches and reduce weight of large branches. And remember, sometimes hazardous trees are best removed.

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