

Are you performing tree care or tree work?

This article was initially about young tree pruning. However, it morphed into a reflection on the tree industry after a career that has spanned 4 decades. I have run a tree company, worked for a big tree mover and been a private arborist consultant. So, I have perspective. Although, the story does begin with the insights that young tree pruning provides.

When I discuss young tree pruning with colleagues, they inevitably nod their heads in agreement. Pruning of young trees is critical for promoting resilient tree forms and to mitigate poor branching angles. But when I ask how much of this pruning they perform, their answer is “very little.” Do they promote or pursue this service? Their answer is the same: very little.

In his seminal book “An Illustrated Guide to Pruning” Dr. Ed Gilman describes the objectives and treatments essential to proper young tree pruning. All arborists should read this book so they know how to prune young trees. He also discusses the appropriate dosage of live limb pruning during any one treatment as 50% for young, 25% for medium-aged, and 10% for mature trees. For me, this is where the discussion of care versus work begins. (Note: this discussion is not new, but is a topic worth revisiting.)

The capital expenditure for a tree company is considerable. Chipper trucks, buckets, and spray rigs are expensive. Tree industry employees and insurance rates are also high. These facts have led to what is known as “Big Arb.” My interpretation of “Big Arb” is that we have become an industry bloated by expensive equipment and chasing “work” that is unnecessary and probably harmful to trees. Let that sink in.

As I travel, I observe the vehicles that service the tree industry in those locations. In every city and town there are fleets of bucket and chipper trucks that are ostensibly all chasing that 10% of pruning in mature trees. Why? Because these are the high paying jobs. And do they stop at removing just 10% of the live canopy? Generally, no they don’t. Every chipper truck becomes a billboard for deadwood pruning, removals and stump grinding. In higher end markets, IPM services are also advertised. But how much of this is actually tree care? I suggest that only a small amount is actually tree care. The rest is tree work to generate income.

The word “care” implies maintenance. And maintenance is practiced throughout our lives. We maintain ourselves, our children, homes, cars and even relationships. This is care. Trees are also living organisms that we claim to care and maintain. Yet most tree “care” companies pursue pruning because it pays the commissions and bills, versus that which pays the greatest dividends to the trees. If we really cared about the long-term health and safety of trees, there would be many more examples of young tree pruning.

About 20 years ago, I met a fellow in DC who started a company focused on pruning trees less than 20 feet tall. At the time, I thought what a nice hobby for him. In short order he had become one of the busiest tree care operators in the area. His business consisted of a pick-up truck, an assistant and several orchard ladders. His backlog was several months long. He performed beautiful pruning on young trees and ornamentals.

If that isn't enough motivation to add young tree pruning to your list of services, here some other motivations: Research suggests that most deadwood pruning is unnecessary. Removing deadwood doesn't actually help the tree, but may in fact be detrimental. In essence, we should only be removing large pieces of deadwood over important targets. Or, that many tree removals are unnecessary. In personal discussions I have had with Dr. Chris Luley, a leading forest pathologist, he states that we remove far too many trees. His point is that there is a lack of properly performed risk assessments, and a need for deeper understanding of wood decay pathogens. Lack of knowledge in these areas leads to many unnecessary removals. If dead wood pruning and removals are actually not essential, then this greatly reduces two huge money generators in the arborist world.

I am also now seeing an increase in proactive prescriptions for control of soil borne pathogens, such as *Phytophthora* root rot, and for insect infestations such as Emerald ash borer or Beech leaf disease. Is it tree care to pro-actively apply fungicides to soils? What about the possible negative impacts to soil micro-organisms? And, are we helping trees by pro-actively creating multiple injection sites to force chemicals into the vascular system under pressure? And to thinned-barked trees like beech where injection sites can be openings for canker diseases and secondary insects? These are new developments in "tree care" that I believe require closer scrutiny for their motivation and efficacy.

If the underlying motivation for running a tree company is money, then this is tree work. On the other hand, if the motivation is to promote young tree pruning, or to consider the real need for the pruning of live and dead wood, or to perform science-based tree risk assessments, or to balance the risk/reward of chemical applications, then this is tree care.

My final question is which of these describes your approach to arboriculture?