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Damaged Trees: How to Select an Arborist or Tree Service

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Over the past three-to-five years, western, and parts of eastern Nebraska have endured drought conditions resulting in many stressed trees. The drought was partially broken in the fall of 1991 with a snow and ice storm that brought severe early cold on the 30th and 31st of October. This was followed by another, but less severe storm around Thanksgiving. The rest of the winter of 1991-92 was mild and open, producing little or no snowfall after the Thanksgiving storm. However, early spring of 1992 produced a late freeze, bringing an end to an unusual Nebraska winter.

These weather conditions' devastating potential manifested as trees began to leaf out. By mid-June it was apparent many trees were either severely damaged or did not survive the unusual temperature swings that came on the heels of a serious drought. Siberian elms, willows and mulberries were hardest hit, especially in western Nebraska. During the summer of 1992 the Nebraska Forest Service estimated 250,000 trees stood dead on Nebraska public land. Eighty percent of these trees were west of Kearney. Some cities reported 80 to 90 percent mortality of their Siberian elms. At least 500,000 Nebraska trees are in need of pruning to remove dead or damaged limbs.

In eastern Nebraska the problem was much different. Late fall ice storms caused serious damage to countless trees. Damage was widespread from Falls City north to Norfolk and beyond. In this area tree maintenance and repair have become paramount activities.

Communities must now begin to deal with the problem of removing the dead trees and repairing survivors of such devastation. In most cases, the work should be done by professional arborists. This publication provides some information that may be helpful to both municipalities and homeowners who are looking for professional tree-care help.

Hiring an arborist deserves careful consideration. A qualified arborist will do tree work properly and safely, but an unqualified person may further damage the tree, and more importantly may not be insured, leaving the liability burden to the client. This liability could run into the tens of thousands of dollars.

Remember the following points when hiring or contracting with an arborist:

1. Check your telephone directory's yellow pages under "Tree Service" for a listing of those businesses which do tree work in your area. While anyone can list themselves in the phone book, a listing at least indicates some degree of permanence. Be cautious of any arborist that advertises "topping" as a service. "Topping" is not an approved tree maintenance practice.
2. Ask if the arborist is certified by either the Nebraska Arborists Association or the International Society of Arboriculture. Certification is not required by the State of Nebraska but it does indicate that the arborist has a high degree of knowledge.
3. If the arborist you are considering is not certified, determine if he/she is a member of any professional organizations, such as the Nebraska Arborists Association, the International Society of Arboriculture or the National Arborists Association. Membership in these and other professional organizations does not guarantee quality, but does indicate professional commitment.
4. Ask for certificates of insurance, including proof of liability for personal and property damage and workman's compensation. Then, contact the insurance company to make sure the policy is current. Under some circumstances, you can be held financially responsible if an uninsured worker is hurt on your property or if the worker damages a neighbor's property.
5. Ask for local references. Take a look at some of the work, and if possible, talk with former clients. Experience, education and a good reputation are signs of a good arborist.
6. Don't rush into a decision just because you are promised a discount if you sign an agreement now. Be sure you understand what work is to be done for what amount of money. It is not generally a good idea to pay in full until the work is completed.
7. Most reputable tree care companies have all the work they can handle without going door to door. People who aren't competent arborists may solicit tree work after storms, seeing an opportunity to earn quick money. Storm damage creates high risk situations for both workers and property.
8. If possible, get more than one estimate.
9. A conscientious arborist will not use climbing spikes except when removing a tree. Climbing spikes open unnecessary wounds that could lead to decay.
10. Good tree work is not inexpensive. A good arborist must carry several kinds of insurance as well as pay for expensive and specialized equipment. Beware of estimates that fall well below the average. There may be hidden costs or the arborist may not be fully

Figure 1. A handy form for tree service comparisons.

Tree Service	Qualifications	Insurance	Price	References
Joe's Cutters	NAA certified	Yes	\$270	Mildred said a good job.
Bob's Badgers	No	Yes	\$170	OK, but rude.

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