

This Arbor Day, Check the Health of Your Trees

The first Arbor Day in America took place April 10, 1872 in Nebraska City, Nebraska, when a proposed “tree-planting holiday” saw an estimated one million trees planted in the state in one day.

Almost 150 years later, our love of trees remains strong as ever—they give us beauty, comfort, shade, protection and a living expression of the seasons.

But the benefits of living with trees also come with risk. Falling trees or branches can damage your home or injure people. They can fall on power lines, leading to outages or even fire, and their roots can damage pipes, foundations and utility infrastructure.

A tree’s owner is legally responsible for damage or injuries caused by their trees. Since it’s difficult to tell when a tree might fail, here are 7 signs that could indicate bad tree health and a hazardous situation in the making.

Tree health trouble signs:

1. **Leaning trees.** A little lean is normal, as most trees don’t grow straight. However, if you see cracked or buckling soil—especially on the opposite side of the lean—that’s an indicator of stress. Another sign is exposed roots around the tree’s base.
2. **Multiple trunks.** A tree with multiple trunks can break if the trunks are weakly attached. Check for cracks and splits where the trunks meet.
3. **Dead branches.** As a normal part of their growth cycle, trees will shed dead branches, called deadwood. Most will eventually fall but keep an eye out for branches with a diameter 2 inches or more—these are more likely to cause damage when they fall.
4. **Fungi or mushrooms.** Fungi growing on the tree’s base or roots signals decay. These organisms feed off the tree’s internal cells, compromising its structural integrity.
5. **Cracks.** Large cracks in a tree’s trunk or branches require immediate attention. Most worrying are horizontal cracks in the trunk; however, any significant crack is a sign that the wood is weak or has already begun to fail and it’s only a matter of time before it snaps.
6. **Cavities.** Although not always the case, tree cavities can signal internal decay. Check for peeling bark and hollow or decayed areas, especially where branches meet trunk. If you notice ants, birds, squirrels, bees or raccoons spending a lot of time on trees that don’t provide food, it may also be a sign that there’s an internal void.
7. **V-shaped branches.** Look at where branches attach to the trunk: those unions should look more like the letter U than V. Tight V-shaped forks are more prone to break than the more open U-shaped ones.

When to call an arborist

Some of the above hazards can be addressed relatively easily. For instance, you can prune branches and use cabling to stabilize a small or medium sized tree that’s leaning. However, if you notice serious hazards or are dealing with especially large or old trees, it’s safest to contact a certified arborist.

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