

# THE GREEN PAGES

## THE GREEN SCENE

### Branching out: Know the 5 easy ways to tell when your trees are in trouble



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**T**rees. You can say they shade us from the burning sun. You can say they absorb carbon dioxide. You can say they block the wind or help absorb storm water or increase property values. But one thing you can't say is that they are indestructible. Trees need proper care, especially in the urban environment.

Property managers, landscape architects, builders, code enforcement officers and lawn-care workers all have the potential to influence the health of your urban forest, and too often their actions, however well-intentioned, have a negative effect.

Tree biology can be compared to the tax code: it's complicated. While your financial planner and your tax advisor are very closely connected, you wouldn't hire your planner to file your taxes, because there's more to a return than reducing your tax burden. Insufficient payment due to a poorly prepared tax return will get you into big trouble.

Unfortunately, many hired tree-care workers do not follow the guidelines defined by the American National Standard Institute's (ANSI) A300 standards for tree-care maintenance, and these uninformed practices can kill your landscape investment and even create a hazard when the limbs begin to fall.

Warren Jacobs, certified arborist for more than 30 years at Jacobs Tree Surgery in Montgomery County, offers five easy indicators of improper care.

"I see these all the time," Jacobs said.

1. Improper depth. A healthy tree flares

out where the trunk meets the roots. If this flare is buried, the tree has been planted too deeply, and the main root system will rot at a depth where oxygen is not present. The tree might sprout roots in an attempt to survive, but it's unlikely that it will thrive. Look for lollipop trunks with no flare.

2. Burlap left on new plantings. Burlap is used to wrap a root ball for transport. The presence of unremoved burlap indicates the root ball was never inspected by the installer nor was the root structure taken into account when determining the planting depth.

3. Abandoned stakes. Staking is a corrective measure used for various reasons (too often because of poor nursery stock), but these supports must be removed within six months to a year, otherwise their guy wires will choke the tree.

4. Scars from improper pruning. Every pruning cut is essentially an injury, yet pruning is a necessary measure in tree care. A cut should never leave a stub or slice into the branch collar (where the branch meets the trunk).

"Improper cuts have a huge impact on the health of the tree," said Jacobs.

When a cut is made at the wrong place, the tree will wall off an excessive amount of healthy wood in response — wood that would otherwise be used to transport and store sugar (food) throughout its system. Tree topping is another painful technique. It's often done to reduce the tree's size, but in the end, new growth will sprout at a chaotic rate and leave you with a poorly shaped, still-too-big, ill tree.

5. Mulch volcanoes. "Mulch is good, but applied improperly it is bad. Very bad. If it's mounded into a volcano around the tree, it causes root girdling and disease and eventually death," said Jacobs.

The practice of trenching to define the volcano's circumference magnifies the problem. Roots exist just below the surface, so a



Photos Courtesy of Warren Jacobs.

**Left, staked volcano: mulch volcanoes and abandoned stakes further degrade this poor nursery stock as evident by the tight branch structure. Center, flush cuts: low branches were improperly flush cut while others in need of pruning were neglected; girdling root visible under a mulch volcano. Right, a good example of well-maintained, thriving trees at Longwood Gardens.**

six-inch dig will cut or damage those roots.

So what can be done to correct improper care? Get input from a certified, tree-care specialist — preferably one who has no financial interest in the maintenance contract — to inspect your trees and offer science-based corrections. This advice applies to both installations and routine maintenance. The specialist will recommend proper pest-control measures, healthy nursery stock resources, proper pruning techniques and proper lawn care in relation to the tree as well as proper preconstruction, preventative measures. The inspection may cost as little as \$500, a fee well worth the investment because, once the corrections are made, "it doesn't cost any more to do it right than it does to do it wrong," said Jacobs.

Another option is a cost-effective, full-

tree inventory that can be an essential planning tool for maintenance scheduling, cost estimating, decision-making and resource management. More information is available at the International Society of Arboriculture at (217) 355-9411 or [www.TreesAreGood.com](http://www.TreesAreGood.com); the American Society of Consulting Arborists at [www.asca-consultants.org](http://www.asca-consultants.org); or Warren Jacobs at [www.JacobsTreeSurgery.com](http://www.JacobsTreeSurgery.com).

Unhealthy trees are a nuisance and a hazard. Healthy trees offer aesthetic, environmental and financial benefits, and they really don't ask for much in return. Just give them a little attention, and you'll be rewarded for years to come.

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