

Lamorinda OUR HOMES

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Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

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Taking care to prevent damage to (and from) trees

By John T. Miller



This rotted tree had potential of toppling nearby powerlines. Photos Pippa Fisher

With last winter's considerable rain following three years of drought, many large trees toppled, causing considerable damage throughout the Lamorinda area. Homeowners and residents are anxious to know what measures they can take to prevent more of the same this year.

According to a pair of arborists interviewed, the bad news is that it may be too late to save your tree, and it will take swift action to save your – or your neighbor's – house.

Once signs of disease or decay appear above ground, the damage to the roots may have progressed too far and cannot be undone.

Certified arborist Thomas Raeth, with Lafayette Tree and Landscaping, gives a list of some of the practices that can lead to disease: “When we have a drought and people cut back on water it can manifest stress in different ways. It may take time for trouble to develop.”

While conserving water is necessary, mature trees need to have deep watering to maintain their health, says Raeth. “Pines are a good example. The drought stretched their health, allowing beetles to invade and consume the trees.”

Raeth cautions that when mulching trees, it's important to use properly composted chips. “People cut down trees because they're diseased, and if you put those chips back on the ground without sterilizing them, the disease goes back into the ground.” Also, if the chips are fresh, they use up nitrogen to decompose, depriving your

trees of nutrition. Proper composting can take up to two years, with temperatures needing to reach 400-500 degrees in the pile.

A common mistake is pruning while the sap is active in the tree. The best time to prune is from December to February.

Another error is leaving the stake from the nursery attached to a newly planted tree. A new stake should be placed at least 6 inches from the tree, allowing for wiggle room. “The movement of the trunk stimulates the tree to strengthen its roots,” says Raeth. When the tree is sturdy enough to support itself, the stake should be removed.

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The split in the trunk of this tree reached all the way to its base.