



Stephen &amp; Kristin Pategas

## in the garden by Stephen and Kristin Pategas

# What Grows Up – Must Come Down

In your lifetime, numerous trees that you become attached to will reach the end of their life span. In fact, if a tree reaches its lofty height and spread it is likely that it is already reaching maturity. This is followed by the onset of either a natural slow decline or, if it is compromised, by a rapid or

even instant death. This is especially true for trees in more urbanized settings where their growing conditions are not ideal and at times horrendous. Natural hazards include lightning, which has the power to instantly kill a tree; hurricanes, which can topple or weaken a tree; or diseases, often carried by insects.

### Situations to avoid - many are created by construction work or improper care:

- Soil compaction
- Root damage
- Chemicals dumped on the ground
- Alteration of the soil pH (concrete products are alkaline and increase the pH)
- Damage to the trunk
- Improper pruning
- Removal of large limbs which are unlikely to seal over and provide entry points for pathogens
- Use of sealers on wounds or cuts or filling cavities with foam

### What to look for:

- Loss of foliage
- Thinning of the canopy with dieback on the ends of the branches as the tree marshals its reserves to protect its main trunk
- Discoloration on the bark coming from areas where trunks or large branches are joined
- Shedding of limbs as the tree's health declines
- Shedding of bark

### What to do:

- Find out the optimal pH for the tree you have or want to plant and have the soil tested through the Orange County Extension Service. Sometimes amendments can be added to adjust the pH.
- During construction, protect trees with barriers that keep vehicles, workers, debris, and chemicals well away from the trunks. Damaging the tree roots can destabilize the tree and cause them to topple.
- Schedule regular inspections by a certified arborist and have branches removed before they drop.
- At some point, removal of the whole tree becomes the best course of action.
- Contact your municipality to obtain a tree removal permit. The permit process should include instructions on what type of replacement is required. In some cases when it is not possible to plant another tree on the property, a payment into a "tree fund" can be made.

### What to do if the tree is on adjacent property:

- Have a conversation with the property owner.
- Typically, homeowners' property insurance policies will not cover damage to the property if it is not a structure.
- If there is damage to your insured structure you will be responsible for the damage and your deductible unless prior to any damage occurring you send a certified letter noting your concerns to the neighboring property owner along with a copy to your own insurance company.
- If there is damage to your property, insist that your insurance company seek compensation from the neighboring property owner's insurance company.

Some trees are the largest and oldest living objects on the planet. With proper selection, planting, pruning, and care even urban trees can live long lives. To provide environmental, aesthetic, and financial benefits - plant trees now to plan for future loss.



At left: Trenching is harmful since most tree roots are in the top 12 - 18 inches of soil. Middle: Cutting major roots can destabilize a tree and cause it to topple. At right: In decline in 2014, this tree is now hazardous three years later. Photos by Stephen G. Pategas/Hortus Oasis.