

Misunderstood Trees

By Deb Nelson, Stoughton Tree Commission

Too often, decisions to remove trees go misunderstood. This is because there are many factors involved in making such decisions and most often, it does not have anything to do with whether a tree is producing green leaves or not. In fact, there are seven signs for potential failure that professional arborists use to determine whether or not to remove a tree.

Furthermore, there are some signs that warrant a medium risk to targets and still other signs that warrant a high risk to targets. Determining whether signs for potential failure are medium or high risk is necessary in determining how quickly action needs to be taken.

The most obvious of these signs for failure is dead wood. **Dead wood** is not negotiable. Dead trees and branches are unpredictable and can break and fall at any time. Therefore, dead wood is always determined to be a high risk to targets and actions to remove lodged dead branches, dead tops, large attached branches, or entire dead trees should be taken immediately.

Another more obvious sign for failure is a **crack**. Although frost cracks are more superficial and don't usually warrant any action, deep splits through the bark that extend into the wood of the tree are extremely dangerous. Once again, because cracks in a tree area a sign that the tree is already failing, very often trees with cracks are considered a high risk to targets and action should be taken immediately.

Decaying trees can also be prone to failure, but the presence of decay, by itself, does not indicate that the tree is hazardous. A tree usually decays from the inside out, eventually forming a cavity, but sound wood is also added to the outside of the tree as it grows. Trees with sound outer wood shells may be relatively low risk, but this depends upon the ratio of sound to decayed wood, and other defects that might be present. If a cavity affects 1/3 to 1/2 the stem circumference, moderate risk would warrant keeping a watchful eye for future indicators of failure. However, if a cavity affects more than half the stem circumference, immediate action is required. Furthermore, if evidence of advance decay, such as **mushrooms, conks, and brackets** are growing on root flares, stems, or branches this should also warrant immediate action.

Another sign of decay that is not as obvious as fungus or cavities is evidence of **cankers**. Cankers are areas of missing, dead, or sunken bark usually caused by injury or disease. Because cankerous areas also promote decay, it is very important to analyze these areas when determining ratios for sound to decaying wood.