

Drought Stressed Trees: The Dos and Don'ts!

by Paul J. Pugliese

As we all know, trees are one of the few things in our landscapes that can't be replaced easily. Unfortunately, older trees are often the first things to be neglected or to go completely unnoticed until something goes terribly wrong. It happens all too often — our office gets called when it's almost too late to do anything: the tree's branches are falling; leaves are falling in mid-summer; the canopy is thinning out; mistletoe is on every branch, etc.

Many folks react to the above listed symptoms in total desperation to "save" a tree. They might start watering a 100-year-old tree every day that's never been watered before. They start fertilizing a mature tree that hasn't been fertilized since it was planted. They might even cover up those exposed roots with topsoil, thinking that the tree is going to erode away in the next rain storm. Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but these are all things that they should NEVER do when a tree is already in decline and especially under drought stress.

What you should be doing in protecting your trees now — before a problem occurs — in order to prevent the decline of your favorite old tree in the first place. Trees should be respected and given their own space to grow. Trees are impressive biological organisms and require a great deal of resources to support all those leaves. Also, keep in mind that trees have been taking care of themselves for millions of years without human "help" or "interference" — depending on your perspective. Most often, trees die because of something that we humans do wrong (although with good intentions). Here are the top 10 BIG mistakes that people make all too often.

1. Plant too close to a house — I like shade as much as the next person, but having a tree in my house should only happen on Christmas!
2. Pave a driveway over roots or just drive on roots — do you like cars driving on your feet?
3. Plant too many trees, too close together — kind of like having 10 kids in a one-room apartment.
4. Water ever day that the water regulations allow — drowning; need I say more?
5. Prune limbs off that are "in the way" — this might have something to do with #1?
6. More fertilizer must be better, right? — probably not a good idea to be forcing the plant to put on new growth in the middle of a drought, and remember, fertilizers act like salts!
7. Let's hang as many bird feeders, deer stands and tree houses on the tree as possible!
8. Rake all the leaves into a volcano around the tree — how many blankets can you stand on your bed at one time?
9. Tie anything around the tree trunk, i.e. chains, barbed wire, clothes lines, ropes, animals, tree houses — kind of like putting a noose around your neck.
10. Doing absolutely nothing — now who's going to fix all the problems that you caused?

So, now that we know what NOT to do, here are a few simple tips on how to "save" that beautiful old drought-stressed tree this summer. Do put a two to three inch layer of mulch around the roots of the tree at least as far as the drip line (or farther) to conserve soil moisture. Note that tree roots can reach as far as 1½ to 2 times the drip line in circumference! Water trees only ONCE every couple of weeks if there isn't any rain in the forecast. Most established trees only need the equivalent of one inch of rain every seven to ten days.

If at all possible, avoid any root disturbing activities from nearby construction or digging. Minimize soil compaction by not driving on roots (lawn mowers included) as well as avoiding any playground activity and foot traffic. And remember, fertilization only should be done based on the recommendation of a soil test. Most established trees only should be fertilized once or twice a year in spring/summer and often get more than enough from the passing of a nearby lawn application. Pruning on large, mature trees should be left to the professionals from both a practicality and safety viewpoint. Be sure to hire an ISA certified arborist to do any type of major tree maintenance.

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