

Living with Tall Trees

The character of Idaho is often defined by its native trees. Pine, fir, spruce, hemlock, and cedar cover the mountains around us. In earlier times, most of the timber in the lower areas was logged, however many communities retain remnants of the forests that once covered the valleys.

Native Ponderosa Pine and Douglas fir are the trees most often encountered in the river/lake communities of Post Falls, Coeur d'Alene and Hayden. The tall, stately trees provide many benefits including shade, storm water mitigation, clean air, wildlife habitat, and increased property value.

Following wind storms, home owners are often concerned about the risk of living with tall trees. While this risk is real, it is important to remember that, as trees grow to their mature height, they develop form and strength. That is why our neighborhood "residual forest" of trees exceeds 70' in height! The majority of trees withstand winds like those we have experienced in recent storms, and become stronger as a result. A small number do, however, succumb to uncommon wind bursts or downdrafts by breaking or uprooting.

We live with risk every day, while driving, flying, and even walking. Living with tall trees also poses some risk, but there are actions we can take to lessen the risk.

Hiring a certified arborist to assess the condition of your trees is probably the best insurance you can buy. Arborists will have the experience and tools necessary to look for and assess defects that may contribute to tree failure. If a risky condition is discovered, they will be able to discuss a course of action, pruning or cabling, for example, or as a last resort, removal.

Topping a tree to reduce its height is an expensive decision and is not an acceptable course of action. Rather than reducing, it may actually increase the risk of tree failure. Topping stresses a tree, introduces decay into the top and creates hazardous conditions. Topping is expensive! The practice destroys the natural branching structure of a tree making a tree ugly and reducing its value. If a tree survives the ordeal, side shoots begin to grow rapidly. These branches are not well attached to the stem, are prone to breakage and need to be pruned every few years to assure safety. An ethical arborist will not recommend topping as an alternative.

Home owners can perform an initial visual assessment of a tree. Most trees are not "perfect" and they are healthy even while hosting some insects or disease. However large wounds at the base of a tree, unusual swellings, or other defects may indicate problems that call for further investigation. Other things to look for include, broken limbs that may have caught in the upper canopy of the tree, cracks along the trunk, at the base of a tree, or along large branches, large cracks or raised soil on the windward side of a tree and new or increased leaning following a wind storm (which may indicate root

problems), mushrooms on the trunk or at the base, or many large branches arising from one point on the trunk, which may be weakly attached to the trunk.

The environment around a tree has much to do with its health as well. The root system of a tree is its anchor. In the past, it was thought that all trees had tap roots growing in a fashion similar to carrots. Research has shown that trees actually have root plates that spread 2 to 3 times the width of a tree's canopy. (Picture a wine glass sitting on a dinner plate.) Roots stay in the top 18 to 24" of soil in order to take advantage of nutrients and oxygen found in top soil. Trenching close to the base of a tree severs structural roots, compromising tree stability. Grade changes are damaging to trees as well. Digging down through the root plate destroys many of the roots nourishing the tree, leading to starvation and sometimes death. Mounding soil on top of a root plate may suffocate roots and contribute to stem rot.

Surrounding environments also contribute to tree strength. Trees grown in groves support each other by filtering wind, reducing its force. If trees are harvested, leaving only one or two standing, their "support system" is lost and stability may be compromised.

Remember, trees are dynamic, living organisms that respond to conditions around them. They enhance our environment and add value to our homes. By being aware of factors that may impact the health of your tree, you can live with and reap their benefits.

If you have questions about trees or tree care, call the urban forestry department in your community; Post Falls, 773-8147, Coeur d'Alene, 769-2266; Hayden, 772-4411.