

Who Butchered My Tree?

How would you feel if you returned home from work to find that the beautiful shade trees by the street in front of your house had been drastically pruned? Now, instead of a thick, symmetrical canopy of leaves, there is a gaping, V-shaped hole through the middle of the tree that reveals the overhead electrical conductors. “Why did this happen?” you would undoubtedly ask.

You may not be aware that while trees add significantly to the beauty of our communities, they are also responsible for costly property damage as well as dangerous power outages. In fact, tree failure is by far the leading cause of outages nationwide. The tree that grows into electrical conductors presents a potential hazard to you and others in the community if it becomes energized or wipes out a power line. This is why we see utility line clearance contractors in our neighborhoods trimming trees.

Some residents get irritated and feel that these trees are needlessly damaged. “The Tree Care Industry Association receives a lot of calls from homeowners complaining that their utility company ‘drastically’ cut trees near power lines,” says Tchukki Andersen, staff arborist for the association.

“While it is vitally necessary for utilities to trim trees, sometimes severely, it is nevertheless important for them to follow tree care standards of practice,” adds Robert Rouse, TCIA’s director of Accreditation. TCIA is the Secretariat for the American National Standards Institute A300 Standard, a national standard that governs tree pruning operations, including line clearance.

“When one is evaluating the quality of line clearance tree trimming, it’s important to consider that the utility’s primary objective is to prevent outages as well as electrical hazards,” explains Rouse. Minimally, the tree should be left in a healthy state, with at least some aesthetic value. If this cannot be accomplished, the utility may opt to remove the tree rather than create an eyesore and future problem.

Why the gaping hole in the canopy? First, the utility company specifies a certain amount of clearance around its wires, depending upon the voltage, the tree’s growth rate and other characteristics, and the pruning cycle (how frequently it will be pruned). Furthermore, scientific research has proven that it is better from the standpoint of tree health if the trimming crew removes whole limbs with a relatively small number of large cuts versus making numerous small cuts and leaving stubbed off branches. Finally, utilities have found that removal of entire limbs helps to train the future growth of the tree away from the wires, keeping maintenance costs to a minimum while helping to insure that the tree needn’t receive the same drastic pruning in the future.

What should consumers do?

When you or your utility hire a TCIA member company, you are assured that the company has access to the most recent information on tree care practices. Homeowners who would like a professional arborist to assess their trees should contact the Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA), a public and professional resource on trees and arboriculture that was established in 1938. It has more than 2,000 member companies who recognize stringent safety and performance standards, and are required to carry liability insurance. TCIA also has an Accreditation program that requires companies to meet industry standards and qualifications, including ANSI A300 pruning standards. An easy way to find a professional tree care service provider in your area is to use TCIA’s “Locate a Member Company” feature. You can use this service by calling 1-800-733-2622 or by doing a ZIP code search at: www.treecaretips.org

Editors: If you would like additional information or digital photos, please contact editor@tcia.org.