

Winter can be a good time for working on trees

We have five huge trees on our property that could cause a lot of damage if they ever fell on our house or garage, and since the October 2011 storm I've been meaning to check them out. However, since then I've frittered away the time in a fit of procrastination.

But a few weeks ago a crew from Grimshaw Tree Service of Windsor appeared at my neighbor's house and severely trimmed some of his large trees, using a crane and other serious equipment. Startled into action, I got a card from one of the workers and called owner Fred Grimshaw to get a free estimate on the health of our trees and some information on how to spot tree problems.



Harlan Levy

CONSUMER
DIARY

First, obviously, a tree is not a hazard unless it has a likely target like a right of way, wires, a house or other structure, or a neighbor's pool. "It's easier to move a tree than a swimming pool," said Grimshaw, a state-certified arborist since 1975 and owner of the 44-year-old Grimshaw Tree Service.

"For hazard assessment, there is no bad time to look at a tree, and particularly after a storm, when stress may be a factor as far as safety, an inspection would be appropriate," Grimshaw told me, adding: "Some trees have defects that are obvious, and some are not so obvious — for instance, roots that may not be on firm ground but are in wet areas and are more susceptible to 'wind throw.'"

Also, if new growth is not adequate, he said, that might indicate stress, which — "because the knee bone is connected to the shin bone" — might mean that the roots are not capable of supporting the tree adequately.

But you don't have to be an arborist to spot some clues that indicate a potential problem, Grimshaw said.

You could suspect a weakness, he said, if the tree is leaning unnaturally, or there's a fractured branch or deadwood where there wasn't any before.

If a tree is losing foliage when it shouldn't, or the color of the leaves is off or inconsistent, or the leaves are turning color prematurely, it's a sign of a problem, he said, "but it's difficult to tell if it's

from a disease, or drought conditions, or insects or an unhealthy pH condition" in which the soil is too acidic or not acidic enough for the species of tree.

"In the fall evergreens lose approximately a third of their needles," Grimshaw said, but if they lose a noticeable amount more, or the needles turn a different color than usual, there could be a problem.

Note: Needle loss may be typical of the season. "In the fall, you get some needle drop, and they'll turn brown and shed," Grimshaw said. "The timing is the issue."

In winter it's easy to see a tree's structure. "You can get a handle on whether it's got a lot of deadwood," he said. "Pruning is easily done in the winter, and there's less chance of spreading infection with your pruning tools, as far as foliar diseases that can be picked up with tools."

Also, trees can fool you, Grimshaw noted. "They may have buds that appear healthy, but the buds may not be. They could have dried up and died. So you have to get 'up close and personal' to see if you've got a healthy tree," he advised.

• **Insects:** Many are dormant in the winter, like carpenter ants. They hole up in the wood and are protected from freezing by the tree. Some of the borers are inactive although they're still alive. Basically, winter is not a great time to determine insect populations.

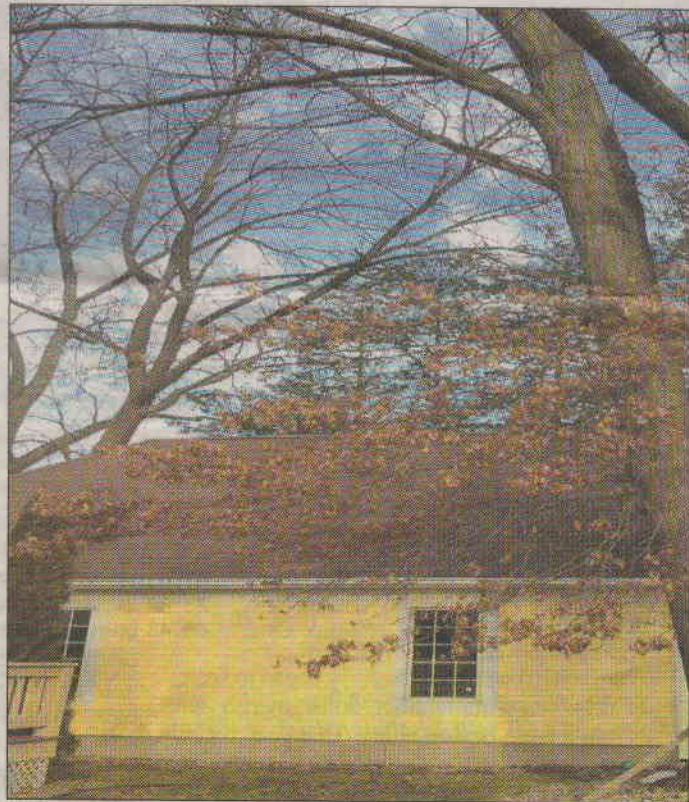
But you can look for eggs that are wintering. Gypsy Moth and Winter Moth eggs may be on a tree in many different locations if you know what they look like, Grimshaw said. Also, you may be able to spot borer holes.

• **Cost:** You have to determine if you have a qualified company, one that provides for workers compensation and takes out Social Security taxes. The rates can be anywhere from \$75 an hour to \$125 an hour for a contractor who brings a crew, Grimshaw said. It also depends on equipment.

"If you need a crane to take a tree down it would be more expensive per hour compared to a crew hand-climbing the tree and cutting it down. But," he said, "it would probably take more hours than using a crane or other equipment."

• **Training, experience, compliance with state law:** "Not all arborists are equal," Grimshaw said, so check references and any history of complaints lodged at the Department of Consumer Protection. You must be a state-licensed arborist to legally prune, cable, brace, repair, diagnose and treat disease and insect problems, perform tree surgery, and apply fertilizer. If you're not, you're allowed only to do removals. To be a licensed arborist you need to pass a multipart exam and amass a certain number of continuing education credits every year.

Now, I await our trees' diagnosis — and hope we don't have to spend too much to correct problems (Good luck!).



Harlan Levy / Journal Inquirer

Large trees tower over the Levys' garage and house and need to be inspected.