

# Beyond the drought

## Tree health care pays off year in, year out

by Spence Rosenfeld

In late July, I was asked to write an article about how the drought is damaging Atlanta's trees and what can be done about it, in about 750 words. After thinking about it, that type of article could be written in a handful of sentences, and here they are:

Many of Atlanta's trees are dying from the drought. Water them according to guidelines and restrictions. Mulch root zones with wood chips to help hold soil moisture and add organic matter. Inject root zones with organic soil conditioners to hold soil moisture and improve soil health. Hire a professional arborist to inspect trees and provide a comprehensive tree health care program.

The real story, however, goes much deeper. Trees are the most dominant living component in the landscape but typically

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receive the least attention and care. Often seen as an "accessory service," funds are typically budgeted for tree removal rather than a tree health care program that could have saved the same trees. Mature trees are virtually irreplaceable, but often are sadly allowed to die

from neglect. At the same time, dangerous trees are ignored until they break or fall causing property damage, injury, or even loss of life. Regular tree health care treatments

and inspections can at least double the life expectancy of trees, increase their resistance to drought, storm damage, and other forces of nature, and prevent serious accidents. I have spent the last 35 years educating tree owners and managers and promoting tree health care with great success and fulfillment. I would like to share some examples to continue that effort now.

### Tree health requires care

In 1983, and then again in 2006, I conducted a survey of the trees at Oakland Cemetery. During that 23 year time span, no tree care had been provided and results showed that half of the trees had died from neglect. Piedmont Park's trees had been similarly neglected for years and were dying at the rate of seven or eight mature trees each year. Other trees were breaking apart. In 1999/2000, we implemented a comprehensive pruning and soil therapy program to improve tree health, with astonishing results. Tree mortality and structural failure essentially stopped for the next three years. Gradually, however, without continued care, trees again began to fail.

Other properties where consistent tree care has been provided show similar results. A study at the University of Florida revealed that pruned trees are 200% less likely to break than trees that weren't pruned. Trees that have been maintained and treated with organic soil amendments are much more resistant to drought stress. Organic soil conditioners can increase soil moisture

holding capacity by a comparable 200%. Urban trees growing in sterile soils simply require supplemental care to avoid premature death or failure.

### Priceless protection

Recently, at 8:30 on a Saturday night, I received an emergency call about a tree that fell on a house. The 30" diameter White Oak, growing 25 feet from the back of the house, had broken off cleanly at about 40 feet. The entire top landed squarely on the roof with great force. The trunk was left standing with a couple of outstretched low limbs still attached as if to say, "What happened?" and the homeowner was equally bewildered. He had been standing in an upstairs bathroom and barely escaped death. Several limbs had pierced the roof and were protruding through the kitchen and bedroom ceilings. More rain was forecast, but the roof couldn't be covered with a tarp until the tree was removed, requiring a complex system of ropes, pulleys, and the construction of lowering devices. The tree removal took a week at a cost of \$15,000. Upon inspection, the tree was seriously decayed and structurally unstable at the break point. A routine tree inspection would have revealed the flaw and the tree could have been safely removed before it fell. The homeowner's comment was, "Wow, it looked healthy to me." I have seen similar situations hundreds of times and been an expert witness in numerous personal injury cases and wrongful death lawsuits. I suspect the drought has made trees more brittle and prone to failure. Please recommend that property managers and owners have their trees regularly inspected by a professional arborist.

### Saving trees, adding value

Finally, trees must be protected from root loss during construction. Root damaged trees are more prone to drought stress or uprooting. At the same time, tree protection and tree health care during construction can dramatically transform a project, save money, and result in an instant wooded effect that can improve leasing or increase property values by 20%. Projects where trees were protected simply stand out from others: Piedmont Center, Ravinia, UPS headquarters, Wildwood, Post Riverside and 40 other Post projects, Emory Conference Center, Sanctuary Park, and hundreds more. Often, tree protection is seen as an expense and ordinance compliance issue instead of a necessary and important part of the construction process. Experience, however, has shown that an effective tree protection program will pay for itself at least 10 times over in faster leasing, tenant retention, increased property value, effective planning, recompense savings, environmental benefits, and even reduced tree removal and tree and landscape replacement costs.

Tree care and tree protection are critical scientific components of today's green, sustainability movement. When put in perspective, it's not an option but a necessity to preserve and enhance our quality of life.

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