

## **Visual Tree Assessment (VTA) of Scaffold Limbs**

Last issue we looked at performing a Visual Tree Assessment (VTA) of the limb attachments. Now we are going to extend out assessment a little further out the branch. There are many situations which may arise that would cause a Scaffold limb to present a potential for harm.

Often you will look for some of the same flaws found throughout the other portions of the tree. Flaws like included bark, decay, loose bark and the presence of pests and insects.

There are many conditions which may leave a limb weakened and subject to failure. Sometime these are natural structural flaws in the way the tree has grown. Sometimes they are resultant from stress which has been put on the tree.

An example of a naturally occurring condition which should be observed is when a tree limb has an odd bend which does not look natural. During the VTA process the limb should be observed with attention being paid to whether the limb can support the weight of the odd bend during periods of stress like ice, wind and snow. Another natural growth habit may be excessive end weight and low crown to stem ratio. Proper VTA should attempt to determine if the limb can support the weight of these odd growth habits.

New areas to look for when performing a VTA are cracks and seems which may have resulted from a storm related event like ice and snow load or from a wind storm. These cracks can often be seen from the ground and should be investigated. The presence of a crack may lead to a limb becoming what is commonly called a hazard beam. It is a limb that may fail with little or no warning.

As with other parts of the tree the presence of decay and or fungal fruiting bodies is a telltale sign of potential for harm. The VTA technician should attempt to determine how extensive the decay is. To do this may require an in tree inspection of the potential weakness.

Old pruning cuts or topping injury can also lead to potential failure. While the tree may have lots of foliage the point where the old pruning or topping cut was made may be an area of decay which can not support the lateral limbs growing from the cut area. Often times after a tree has been topped the lateral limbs or suckers will grow quickly but be poorly attached to the main stem. There is often also decay in the center of the topped stem which extends back into the stem leaving a thin layer of stem supporting a large sucker growth limb.

Loose hanging branches and large dead branches are further conditions which should be alleviated. No tree should be allowed to have large hanging or dead limbs which might detach or dislodge and fall hitting a target below. Even a small dead limb falling from a large height in a tree can cause a great deal of damage when it hits a target below.

One final area which should be assessed is the presence of insects. A stream of honey bees flying in and out of the crown may indicate a cavity or hollow which is not easily seen from the ground. They can also present a hazard to children, or tree workers who may climb into the tree. It should go without saying that a large bald face hornets nest in a tree may present a risk of hazard to lawn workers and recreational users as well as to any workers who have to access the tree.

One final insect that should be considered is if the tree has the presence of carpenter ants running up and down the trunk. While a few ants will almost always be found in nature a steady stream of ants may be a tell tale sign of further problems.

Not on the Author

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