

## How to Hire a Tree Care Professional

*Nicholas Polanin, Somerset County Agricultural Agent; Martha Maletta, Hunterdon County Horticultural Consultant; and Jason Grabosky, Ph.D., Extension Specialist in Urban and Community Forestry*

**T**rees are valuable landscape assets. They provide beauty and shade, along with a number of social, environmental, community, and economic benefits to our cities, town, suburbs, and landscapes. For these reasons, trees require an investment of time, money and expertise for the proper selection, planting, care, maintenance and removal. When problems occur, such as storm or insect damage, or general maintenance is required, the help of a tree care professional may be warranted. Pruning or the removal of large trees is hazardous work, especially if it requires climbing or working from an elevated position. Such work should be left to trained and qualified tree care professionals.

Tree care professionals (arborist/salesperson) will usually offer a range of services including pruning, tree removal, remedial care (storm damage), planting, preventive care (a Plant Health Care Program), maintenance (fertilization, pest and disease control), cabling and bracing, lightning protection, and vertical mulching (deep aeration). Consulting arborists advise and provide diagnoses, recommend treatments, and complete evaluative appraisals in situations that necessitate experience in the science and practice of arboriculture. Some consulting arborists assist as “experts of choice” in providing expertise and testimony in legal cases involving damage or injury related to trees.

### Finding a Tree Care Professional

In New Jersey, anyone can claim to be an arborist or tree expert, so it is important to inquire about experience, training, insurance, and references. The following are some tips to help you choose a reputable, knowledgeable, and professional individual or company. Compile a short list of companies or individuals to contact. Recommendations from family, friends, or neighbors who have had tree work done, and the phone book yellow pages listing under “Tree Service” are places to start.

Certification is one criterion that can help identify tree care professionals. New Jersey Certified Tree Experts “...have been examined and proven to be competent in the science and art of diagnosing, treating, and preventing tree injuries” by the Board of Tree Experts, New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. This certification process measures the arborist’s skills in identification, diagnosis and treatment of tree problems through field and written examinations.

The International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) administers another recognized certification program. This test measures an arborist’s level of knowledge and expertise across “domains” of tree care, from biology to identification. This certification lapses if the arborist does not maintain sufficient continuing education units.

While any certification is not a guarantee of quality work, it does indicate a commitment to professionalism and education. Another indication of commitment to professionalism is membership in professional organizations such as the Tree Care Industry Association (formerly the National Arborists Association) or the American Society of Consulting Arborists, to name a few.

### Choosing a Tree Care Professional

Be an educated consumer. Read what you can about the proper pruning and maintenance of trees. County offices of Rutgers Cooperative Extension can provide information and advice.

Beware of companies that solicit business “door-to-door,” require advance payment other than for plant and landscape materials, offer a special deal for fast decisions, or show up unannounced in the aftermath of a tree-damaging storm. Also beware of those who advertise or recommend topping, which is the improper pruning or rounding-over of trees at a pre-determined



height. Proper pruning should never remove more than 25% of the branches or limbs in a given year, and all cuts should be done appropriately to avoid leaving stubs or rip cuts in the bark. Other harmful or unethical tree care practices to avoid include the use of climbing spikes or spurs while working on live trees or tree removal without clear evidence of the need. A professional arborist will always provide a written statement of need, estimate, contract, current certification, insurance, and/or pesticide applicator license on demand.

After you have your short list of quality tree care companies, obtain more than one evaluation of the condition of your trees, the specific work requested or required, and cost estimate in writing. There may be a charge for the consultation, assessment and/or the estimate itself. If tree removal is recommended, the estimate should specify the reasons why the tree needs to be removed. These might include: the tree is dead or clearly dying; the tree is hazardous because of identified problems with the tree itself, because of less than optimal growing conditions, or because of poor location; the tree is an obstruction and there is no other remedy; or the tree is undesirable (e.g. structurally weak, disease or insect prone, an invasive species).

## **Contracting a Tree Care Professional**

Obtain several important pieces of information from the company or companies being considered. Ask for proof of insurance coverage—personal liability, property liability and workmen’s compensation—and call the insurance company to make sure the policy is current and the level of coverage adequate (at least \$1 million per occurrence). Verify certifications and memberships in professional organizations. Request and check references of clients for whom similar work has recently been done.

Once your tree care professional is selected, the contract will be prepared. Read it carefully. It should specify: beginning and end date of work; details of the work to be done with clear identification of the trees to be worked on; the standards to be used for pruning;

specifics of insect and disease control and notification as required by New Jersey law (see below); clean up work that will be done; how any firewood will be handled—size, where stacked; how stumps, if any, will be handled; total cost of specified work and an hourly rate for any unexpected additional work that may be needed outside of the contracted work.

If pesticides for insect or disease control will be applied, New Jersey law requires that the company provide the consumer with written notification of: proposed date of application; brand name(s) of the pesticide(s) to be used; the common chemical name of the active ingredients, if available; the label instructions that relate to the customer or general public safety; and a Consumer Information Sheet. Copies of the pesticide labels must be provided if requested, and adequate time allowed for their review.

## **Additional Resource Information:**

### *RCE Fact Sheets*

For current fact sheets and other publications, please contact your county Rutgers Cooperative Extension office, or visit our website, [www.rce.rutgers.edu](http://www.rce.rutgers.edu).

### *Professional Certifications and Organizations*

New Jersey Certified Tree Experts — New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Parks and Forestry, Community Forestry Program, 501 East State Street, PO Box 404, Trenton, NJ 08625. Call 609-292-2532 or online at [www.nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/forest/community/cte](http://www.nj.gov/dep/parksandforests/forest/community/cte).

ISA Certified Arborists — The International Society of Arboriculture (ISA), PO Box 3129, Champaign, IL 61826-3129. For a statewide or local listing, call 217-355-9411, or online at [www.isa-arbor.com](http://www.isa-arbor.com).

Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA), (formerly the National Arborist Association), 3 Perimeter Road, Unit 1, Manchester, NH 03103. Call 1-800-733-2622, or online at [www.natlarb.com](http://www.natlarb.com).

American Society of Consulting Arborists, 15245 Shady Grove Road, Suite 130, Rockville, MD 20850. Call 301-990-0483, or online at [www.asca-consultants.org](http://www.asca-consultants.org).

© 2004 by Rutgers Cooperative Research & Extension, NJAES, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

Desktop publishing by Rutgers-Cook College Resource Center

Published: January 2004

**RUTGERS COOPERATIVE RESEARCH & EXTENSION  
N.J. AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATION  
RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY  
NEW BRUNSWICK**

Distributed in cooperation with U.S. Department of Agriculture in furtherance of the Acts of Congress on May 8 and June 30, 1914. Rutgers Cooperative Extension works in agriculture, family and community health sciences, and 4-H youth development. Dr. Karyn Malinowski, Director of Extension. Rutgers Cooperative Research & Extension provides information and educational services to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, or marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Rutgers Cooperative Research & Extension is an Equal Opportunity Program Provider and Employer.