

Trees and Houses Go Together

I can't imagine a landscape in Sacramento that could be complete without a number of trees. Besides a host of functional benefits such as the great reduction in energy costs they can provide, our urban forest provides an essential aesthetic element in our desert climate. Trees enrich our souls and soothe our frayed nerves.

However, as with all aspects of nature, there can be a threatening, even dark side to trees.

Not long ago, a house near my midtown office was literally cut in half from rooftop to ground by a giant tree that fell abruptly. Tree roots can push over retaining walls, as is the case in one of our projects currently underway in South Land Park Hills. This project involves over \$10,000 in tree-related repair. Trees can also cause massive foundation damage leading up to \$25,000 in repair bills. Tree damage is like a lightning strike -- there's nothing you can do about it, except hope that you're not in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Often, however, tree problems are caused by poor location or improper selection. If the location and selection was made by your predecessor, or if the tree itself is already such an important part of your landscape that it cannot be corrected, there are steps you can take to intervene and reduce the likelihood of a catastrophic expense or worse. Here are a few suggestions from my many experiences to help balance the needs of trees against the needs of houses:

1. Please, please, please, don't hire some hack pruning crew whose primary benefit is their low cost. Mistakes made in pruning are usually irreversible and can be so destructive that it may require complete removal of the tree at some later date. In spite of all the negative press, I still see many, many tree pruning jobs that are little more than topping. Anytime you see tree pruning which leaves abrupt stumps, it is likely evidence of

incompetence. Every cut a pruner makes on a tree should be carefully considered because it directs where the tree's energy and new growth will occur. Abrupt stumps lead to a proliferation of bushy growth that is weakly attached and likely to fail in storms. It is also more likely to leave wounds that can become infected and decayed.

2. Make sure that whoever works on your tree is licensed, bonded and insured. Check their references and qualifications as carefully as you would in selecting a surgeon for your loved pets. I recommend that you personally be there to see the progress of a major pruning to make sure that there aren't any misunderstandings.

3. Prune roots as carefully as you do the upper part of the tree. If your driveway is cracked because of tree roots, don't assume that hacking away at the roots with a backhoe or smashing them with a sledgehammer and pickaxe will go unnoticed by the tree. The decay and lack of support caused by improper root pruning can be even more destructive than that caused by improper top pruning.

4. If you have a problem with tree roots heaving driveways, pushing on a retaining wall, or getting under a foundation, don't expect that the problem will end after root pruning. It really isn't possible to control roots by installation of metal or concrete barriers, however, unless they're extremely substantial. A better bet is a new technology called Bio-Barrier which is a fabric sheet impregnated with a chemical that doesn't kill roots but discourages their penetration. Although expensive, it has tested as highly effective.

5. If you are adding trees to your landscape either because existing ones had to be removed or because you're starting over, don't plant trees closer than 6 feet to your foundation. They may require distances perhaps up to 15 feet, depending on the

eventual size of the tree and the nature of its root system. Consult a knowledgeable landscape designer if you are unsure.

In conclusion, trees and houses do go together. They just require a little planning and a little care, just like anything else. With the right information, they are the perfect marriage.

Copyright 1996, Michael F. Malinowski, AIA