Choosing an Arborist

Trees are one of the most valuable assets in a landscape. All properties, whether residential, commercial, municipal, or college campuses, enjoy the benefits of having healthy and beautiful trees. In addition to the aesthetic appeal, a well maintained tree can add value to a property, whereas a poorly maintained tree can cause a significant liability. Keeping trees maintained as they age may require the services of an arborist, who can prune, fertilize, assess weather-related damage, or diagnose other tree-related problems.

Professional arborists are trained in the management and care of trees. Removing or pruning trees, especially large trees, can be very dangerous work. Untrained individuals attempting to work on trees can easily cause damage to property, threaten their own lives, or threaten the lives of others. This is why tree work should be performed only by a properly trained and equipped arborist.

Considerations in choosing an arborist

Check with City Hall

Some communities require arborists to be licensed. If so, this will simplify the process of finding a qualified company to work on your trees.

Look for professional affiliation

Companies with memberships in professional organizations demonstrate their willingness to be current on the latest pruning techniques, safety strategies, and tree management information.

American Society of Consulting Arborists (ASCA)
www.asca-consultants.org

International Society for Arboriculture (ISA)
www.isa-arbor.com

Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA)
www.natlarb.com

Check the yellow pages

Look for "tree service" in either the printed or online versions. Listings often mention membership in professional organizations.

Look for ISA certification

The International Society for Arboriculture (ISA) is the most common organization for arborists to join. Companies and individuals can earn the following specific certifications within ISA:

ISA Certified Arborist

ISA Certified Arborist / Utility Specialist
(additional experience in the specialty area of tree care around power lines)

ISA Certified Arborist / Municipal Specialist
(additional experience in the specialty area of urban trees)

ISA Certified Tree Worker / Climber Specialist
(18 months experience professionally climbing trees in a safe/efficient manner)

ISA Board-Certified Master Arborist
(arborists who have reached the pinnacle of their profession)

Be cautious of individuals who go door-to-door seeking business

Most professional tree care companies are busy and seldom, if ever, solicit work this way. Even if the low price and convenience of individuals selling tree work door-to-door might seem appealing, do not take the risk before speaking to a professional arborist.

Check if the company is properly insured

Ask for proof of insurance and call the insurance company directly if necessary. Homeowners could be held responsible for damages or injuries caused by uninsured tree companies. Check if the company has personal and property damage insurance as well as workers' compensation insurance.

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RG 214 Revised July 2011

Ask for available references

When asking, make sure to ask about both recent jobs and older jobs to ensure the company has been reputable over time. Feel free to call references or if possible, visit past jobs to confirm the company's quality of work.

Get more than one estimate

Try to get at least two or three estimates of the tree work you need done. Some companies may charge for estimates, but the small fee will be worth it when you have carefully chosen the best company to do the work. If you do receive more than one bid, do not automatically accept the lowest bid. Carefully check the specification of each bid to compare details of how the work will be accomplished, the insurance of each company, and the professionalism you received during the bid process.

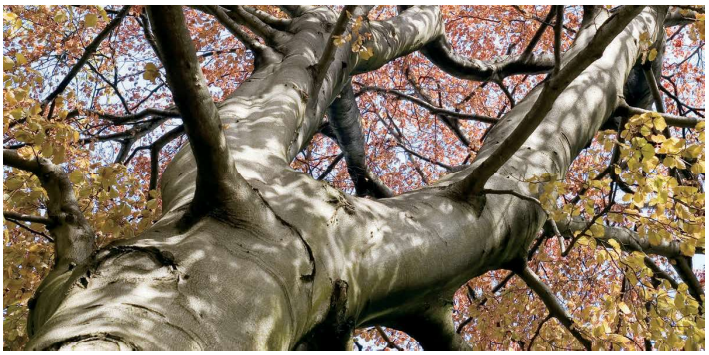
Check the contract, twice

Professional arborists typically give clients a contract to sign before any work is done. Read it carefully and clarify any questions before signing. If any changes are made verbally, ask for an updated contract. Here are a few questions to consider when reading a contract:

- Are additional charges possible?
- Is this price a guarantee or an estimate?
- If this is an estimate, how much is the hourly rate if the job takes longer?
- How will clean-up of the property be handled?
- What time will the work start and end?
- What happens if there is damage to the property?

Professional arborists only perform accepted practices

A good arborist will only recommend topping a tree in rare circumstances, such as to save a tree after severe physical damage to the crown. Arborists should never remove excessive amounts of live wood, use climbing spikes on trees not being removed, or remove living trees without just cause. A good arborist will not perform such practices and will explain why.



Consider what your money buys

After doing the necessary homework in selecting an arborist, remember that these professionals require much more than a chainsaw and pickup truck. Arborists make large investments in equipment, training, labor, and high insurance rates (the highest in the green industry). The combination of high overhead prices, costs to maintain the equipment, and a reasonable profit can give many new customers sticker-shock. Remember that the cost of maintaining trees properly far outweighs the cost of losing some of the most valuable assets of a property. Pruning trees safely and professionally is a unique skill. Take your time selecting the right arborist for your situation and reap the benefits of maintaining healthy, beautiful trees.

For more information

To learn more about selection, planting, cultural practices, and environmental quality, contact your local Iowa State University Extension office or visit these websites:

www.extension.iastate.edu/store
www.extension.iastate.edu/forestry
www.reimangardens.iastate.edu

Call Iowa State's Hortline at 515-294-3108, (Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-noon and 1-4:30 p.m.)

If you want to learn more about horticulture through training and volunteer work, ask your ISU Extension county office for information about the Iowa Master Gardener program.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914 in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Cathann A. Kress, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.