



Hiring an Arborist to Care for Your Landscape Trees

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Landscape trees are assets

Landscape trees are valuable assets to your property and for your community. Keeping your trees attractive, healthy, and safe requires careful attention to their planting and care throughout their lives. While many people have a green thumb, there are situations that arise where the expertise of an arborist is needed to address complex or potentially hazardous tree care needs. The purpose of this publication is to inform home owners, property managers, municipal planners, and others about the tree care services provided by an arborist and the steps that should be taken to hire a qualified arborist.





The benefits that landscape trees provide include, but are not limited to, shade, energy conservation, removal of air pollutants, capturing and filtering of stormwater runoff, buffering wind and noise, increasing property values, and providing a sense of place and well-being (Nowak and Dwyer 2007). Unfortunately, many trees fail to reach their full potential because their maintenance needs are often overlooked. Trees can provide benefits for many years if you invest in preventive care to keep them healthy and safe. This investment will pay dividends in the long run — well cared for trees can provide benefits valued at three times their costs during their life span (McPherson et al. 2005). As with most projects around the house, some tree care tasks are within the capabilities of the do-it-yourselfer. Others require the specialized knowledge, skills, and tools of a professional. An arborist is the professional you should call upon to care for your landscape trees.

Arborists are skilled tree care professionals

Arborists are service professionals who specialize in the planting, care, and management of landscape trees. These professionals have developed their tree care skills through years of formal education and field experience, making them uniquely qualified to care for your trees. Some of the ways an arborist can assist you include:

- Selecting and planting a high-quality tree that will thrive in your landscape
- Properly pruning your trees to enhance their appearance, health, and safety, and orchestrating their removal safely and efficiently when needed
- Diagnosing and treating tree disorders such as diseases, pests, soil fertility problems, and physical injuries
- Preserving trees during construction activity and preparing them for extreme weather such as wind, ice, and lightning

- Evaluating tree structure, assessing hazardous conditions, and recommending actions to mitigate risks

Virginia, like many other states, does not license arborists, so it can be difficult to know whether an individual is qualified to care for your trees. The best way to discern a competent arborist is to ask if the individual has earned the credential of “Certified Arborist”, which is awarded by the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) — a professional organization whose mission is to advance the ethical and scientific care of landscape trees. To become a Certified Arborist, a candidate must first meet minimum education and work experience requirements and then pass a written competency exam. Once certified, the arborist must participate in continuing education programs to maintain his or her certification. Certified Arborists must also abide by a Code of Ethics.

The ISA maintains a website where you can locate a Certified Arborist in your area as well as verify the credential of an individual: <http://www.isa-arbor.com/findanarborist/arboristsearch.aspx>. Also, your local Virginia Cooperative Extension office may keep a list of Certified Arborists who offer tree care services in your county. As a general safeguard, be wary of door-door solicitors offering unrequested services — particularly tree topping, which is a harmful practice that would not be recommended by a Certified Arborist.

Most arborists offer their tree care services through a commercial business. Many reputable tree care companies are members of the Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA), which is a trade association of more than 2,000 commercial tree care firms and affiliated companies whose mission is to advance tree care businesses. In addition to providing education and training programs for its members, TCIA also offers an accreditation program for tree



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care companies. This program puts companies through a rigorous accreditation process to verify and strengthen many facets of their business, including worker safety, business practices, and customer service. When hiring a tree care service, you may wish to inquire whether the company is a member of TCIA or is a TCIA-accredited company. To learn more about TCIA and access their search tool for locating a TCIA-accredited company in your area, visit their website: https://www.tcia.org/TCIA/Find_Qualified_Tree_Care/TCIA/Find_Qualified_Tree_Care.aspx.



A professional arborist has the knowledge, skills, and tools to safely and cost-effectively care for landscape trees and provide specialized services such as installation of a tree lightning protection system. (Photo: M. Shroyer)

Be a wise consumer of tree care services

Once you have located an arborist, you may want to further qualify the individual by asking some questions, such as:

- Can you provide proof of your current certifications and accreditations?
- Can you provide proof of current workers compensation and general liability insurance?
- Can you provide references from existing clients?
- Do you follow industry standards for tree care and safety? Here you might ask if the arborist tops trees or uses tree climbing spikes when pruning trees. If the answer is “Yes”, you may be dealing with an unqualified individual.
- Will you provide a written contract, which describes the scope of work, cost, how the property will be protected, and the time frame in which the work will be completed?



It is advisable to get three quotes from arborists you have pre-qualified and then select the one you feel will provide you the best service and value. The consumer tendency is to go with the lowest bid, but be wary if you are provided a quote that is considerably less than the others. This may be an indication that the arborist does not fully understand the complexity of the task or your expectations for service quality.

Also, if you are unclear about any aspect of the proposal, do not hesitate to ask questions and negotiate with the arborist. Make sure that your expectations for property access, safeguarding, and clean-up are clearly communicated and described in the bid proposal. And, with pruning, make sure that the estimates are comparable in their scope of work (what type and how much pruning will be done). Checking with references can help ensure that the arborist has a reputation for meeting client expectations and delivering services as proposed.

Professional tree care services require time, skill, and specialized equipment to do the job safely and correctly. As a result, you may experience “sticker shock” upon receiving an estimate for services from an arborist. Before losing hope, keep in mind that there may be ways to negotiate a cheaper price for the services. For example, if you are requesting a service that is not time-sensitive, such as general maintenance pruning or removal of non-hazardous trees, then you may want to ask the arborist if contracting the work during the winter would be cheaper. Demand for tree care services slows down during the winter, and arborists are eager to schedule work — often at a discounted rate — so that they can keep their employees busy.

Or, you might ask if the arborist will give a bulk discount. Much of the cost for tree care services is in transporting personnel and equipment to the job site. If you can combine the work on your property with

that of one or more neighbors, then the arborist may apportion some of the down-time cost to each neighbor rather than to you entirely. Finally, ask the arborist if there might be any cost savings if you clean up and dispose of debris on your own. Cleaning up debris is a low-skill, time-consuming process. Your money may be best spent hiring the arborist for the high-value, technical aspects (pruning or felling trees) and then cleaning up the debris on your own. There may even be residual value in the debris as firewood or lumber that will help defray the service fee.

Some tree care tasks are best left to the professionals

Given the cost of tree care services, it is understandable that some tree owners may want to personally take on the task as a weekend project. But before you dust off the loppers and the chainsaw, there are a few things you should consider. The most obvious question is, “Do I really know what I’m doing?” This question has implications not only for the health of your trees, but also for your personal safety and the security of your property. Although trees are incredibly resilient, they can also be severely injured by improper planting, pruning, fertilization, or pesticide treatment. Also, performing these tasks may expose you to hazards such as sharp tools, falling debris, heavy objects, or toxic chemicals. And felling a large tree with a chainsaw is a very dangerous proposition — possibly leading to personal injury or property damage if things go wrong. By hiring a qualified arborist, you are buying the peace of mind that the appearance and health of your trees will be improved and that you and your property will be safe. Although individuals vary in their interests and abilities as do-it-yourselfers, there may be some tree care tasks that you can safely and confidently take on without an arborist. Table 1 provides a handy reference to help you decide when a professional arborist may be needed.



Table 1. List of common landscape tree care tasks that are within the capabilities of homeowners versus professional arborists.

Tree Care Task	Homeowner Capability	Arborist Capability
Planting	Planting small-caliper (<2" diameter) bare-root or container-grown trees	Planting large-caliper (>2" diameter) balled-and-burlapped trees
Soil management	Applying granular fertilizers based upon a soil test report from Virginia Cooperative Extension	Correcting pH, nutrient, compaction deficiencies using specialized materials or methods
Pest management	Applying foliar sprays or soil drenches to small trees (<20' tall) using homeowner-grade pesticides	Applying foliar sprays, soil drenches, or trunk injections to large trees (>20' tall) using restricted-use pesticides
Pruning	Clearance or sanitation (deadwood) pruning on small trees (<20' tall) using manual tools (chainsaws are not advisable) and small ladders	Crown thinning or reduction pruning on large trees (>20' tall) using motorized tools (chainsaw) and climbing or accessing the tree with an aerial machine
Cabling, bracing, guying, and lightning protection	Should not be installed by homeowners	Should be installed by qualified arborists only
Felling and removal	Small trees (<20' tall) in open spaces away from overhead power lines	Large trees (>20' tall) in confined spaces or near overhead power lines

Hiring an arborist is a worthwhile investment

Hiring a professional arborist to care for your landscape trees is an investment in your property and your community. An arborist will advise you in the proper selection, care, and management of your trees so they can achieve their full potential while avoiding foreseeable hazards and liabilities. Heeding a competent arborist's advice will also prevent unnecessary or detrimental work being performed on your trees — the negative impacts of which may not show up for years— saving you time, frustration, and disappointment. By understanding an arborist's qualifications and services, you can make informed decisions about landscape tree care and rest assured knowing your trees are adding value to your property and improving your community's quality of life.

Recommended tree care resources

Virginia Tech Urban Forestry Program

<http://urbanforestry.frec.vt.edu/treeowners.html>

Virginia Cooperative Extension

<http://ext.vt.edu/topics/environment-resources/urban-forestry/index.html>

Trees Virginia

<http://www.treesvirginia.org/education>

Publication References

McPherson, G., Simpson, J. R., Peper, P. J. Maco, S. E. & Xiao, Q. (2005). Municipal forest benefits and costs in five US cities. *Journal of Forestry* 103(8), 411-416.

Nowak, D. J., & Dwyer, J. F. (2007). Understanding the benefits and costs of urban forest ecosystems. In *Urban and Community Forestry in the Northeast* (pp. 25-46). Springer Netherlands.