

Get trees inspected for disease to reduce potential for tragedy



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On a recent trip to Ohio I observed a tragedy unfold in the local news that has concerned me more than the possibility of a bridge collapsing under my vehicle.

People do not usually think about being killed by a tree falling on them, but they should. A 22-year-old Marion, Ohio, woman, Shawna Marie Stevens, was crushed to death Aug. 9 when severe storms, packing high winds, caused a large tree to fall on the driver's side of her SUV as her fiancé helplessly looked on from the passenger's seat. The fiancé was unhurt. The entire news story sent a shiver down my spine, as I was almost killed at age 22 when I was caught in a storm on my new motorcycle. I had an oak tree fall and hit me on State Route 59 in Lake Barrington. I accelerated to avoid the full impact of the tree's trunk and was only grazed by its branches. My father, following behind in his car, almost witnessed the loss of his son.

I write about this because I think Shawna's death (and my near miss) should have a purpose other than to be passing news read and too soon forgotten. Just as America's infrastructure is in need of constant maintenance, our nation's landscaping also needs more attention. As I watched numerous accounts of Shawna's tragic death, and all the homes damaged in her town, I noticed almost every tree was of the soft or Norwegian maple variety that had contracted "wetwood disease." The trees measured in diameters of feet rather than inches.

Wetwood disease, also called slime flux, is a disease that causes the inside of a tree to die and become hollow while seemingly healthy on the outside at the surface. Years ago I learned about this disease when I had an American elm tree removed from next to my house because it just gave me a bad feeling.

The tree surgeons who removed the tree at a cost of over \$600 said I had made the right decision as they showed me the brown chewing tobacco-type substance that used to be healthy wood in its trunk, now easily spooned out to reveal that the structural integrity of the tree had been compromised.

If you have large trees on your property, or in your municipal parkway, oozing or bleeding liquid, odds are you have a tree showing signs of wetwood disease.

Inspectors can rap on the tree with a hammer to test for the disease or drill test holes to see if a root beer-colored fluid runs out to determine the presence of the disease in trees not showing obvious signs. They can offer an estimate for removal of infected trees. You should be sure such professionals you hire are insured and bonded.

When I had my tree removed from my property, the last limb to come down took my entire seamless gutter off the front of the house, negating some of the profits the tree removal professionals may have earned that day.

Nobody likes to spend money needlessly, but when you consider the threat to life and property when a large tree comes down unexpectedly in a storm or otherwise, the ounce of prevention of a tree inspection today can be well worth the pound of cure for losses of tomorrow.

There were some 15,000 customers of the Marion, Ohio, area without electricity after the storm that killed Shawna Stevens on Aug. 9. The damage done to this utility was the direct result of trees falling on power lines and not blown transformers from lightning. The loss to the family and friends of Shawna Stevens cannot be assessed with property losses. Have large trees on your property inspected and urge your municipality and phone and electric utilities to inspect those on your parkway.

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