Protecting Your Valuable Trees by Choosing a Professional Arborist

This information in question and answer format will assist you in choosing a professionally trained and experienced arborist for maintaining your valuable trees. By employing the services of an International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) Certified Arborist who will supervise the work, you can be assured of the services of an arborist who has been examined in minimal areas of tree care including the following:

- Tree Nutrition and Fertilization
- Installation and Establishment
- Tree Biology
- Tree, Soil and Water Relations
- Cabling, Bracing and Lightning Protection
- Tree, People and Ecology (Construction Damage and Hazardous Trees)
- Tree Identification and Selection
- Safety and Climbing
- Pruning, Diagnosis and Treatment

While hiring a Certified Arborist is not a guarantee of the best in tree care work, it is a proper beginning in assisting you in establishing a long term relationship with a reliable and thoroughly professional arborist.

The information contained in this publication (printed in 1994) was based on recommendations from the Pinellas County Cooperative Extension Service and the Pinellas Urban Forest Task Force. It is intended solely to assist the property owner in obtaining the best professional service for tree care.

You can visit the Pinellas County Extension Service’s Web site at: http://coop.co.pinellas.fl.us/

Please refer to the following pages for questions that will aid you in choosing a reputable arborist firm.
How Do You Pick an Arborist?

There is no minimum number of “correct” answers to the following questions. You must be the judge in deciding whether or not to hire the arborist firm.

Q. What specific services does your firm perform?
A. In addition to tree pruning, special fertilization, spraying or injection and careful inspection services are provided by most professionals. Also, make sure that adequate cleanup services are provided, leaving the property neat when the work is completed.

Q. Do you have proof of Liability and Workmen’s Compensation Insurance, and an Occupational License?
A. If so, require the proof be shown prior to entering into a contract for services (be sure to check the effective dates for such coverage).

Q. Do you use pruning paint?
A. If the answer is “yes”, then the person is not up to date with recommended procedures. Pruning paint provides no specific benefits.

Q. Do you use climbing spikes on live trees and palms?
A. If the answer is “yes”, then you have a non-professional person!

Q. Can (would) you identify several of my trees?
A. Any competent arborist should be able to property identify (by common and botanical name) most of the trees in the county. If there is a hesitancy to perform this simple task, or if the responses contain major errors (based on your positive knowledge of the trees on your property), then you have a non-professional.

Q. May I have three (or more) local client references, with phone numbers and the approximate time you performed tree work for them?
A. Any hesitancy to provide this information should serve as a red flag!

Q. (IF the tree is recommended for removal) Do I have other options rather than removing this tree? What are the options?
A. Many instances occur when a tree does not have to be removed in order to improve a situation. Root pruning, proper pruning, changing grass lawn to ground cover or mulch, etc.

Q. If a permit is required for any of the services, will you obtain it?
A. Most municipal and county areas now have comprehensive tree ordinances. For the most part, these regulate the removal of trees and the tree species forbidden to be installed.
Q. May I have a complete estimate of all services you recommend before I must sign a contract?
A. This should be on a formal estimate sheet with compete details of all work intended to be performed. In addition, there should be a work guarantee in writing which assures your adequate protection. Read it carefully before signing any document.

Q. Do you have a formal contract form for me to review before signing?
A. For your protection against possible future disagreement over what services were suggested and agreed to, this is a valuable document. If you sign, be sure to receive a legible copy for your files.

Q. Are you experienced in basic pruning techniques?
A. Answers should include a strong reluctance to “top” trees. The arborist should be able to explain to you what “target pruning”, flush cuts”, drop crotch pruning”, thinning and “deadwooding” are. Don’t hesitate to ask for a graphic demonstration on your own tree (arborist shows by pointing and/or actually making a cut).

Q. Do you de-moss trees? If so, for what reason? How?
A. Spanish Moss (the trailing type) should be removed when it becomes heavy enough to shade foliage or to become a potential cause of damage in wet storms. The excessive weight of extremely heavy moss growth can cause excessive limb drop during hurricane type storms. Both Spanish Moss and Ball Moss (the round type which is attached to the twigs and small branches) can be removed by hand, but an approved chemical spray application for large trees is effective.

Q. How do you prune palms?
A. Palm fronds (leaves) should be carefully cut near the trunk whenever they begin to look yellow or brown or excessively frayed. No more than one-third of the palm fronds should be removed at any one time. Palm bloom stems (spaeths) may be removed prior to their opening and dropping bloom debris. This will eliminate future messy dropping of the fruit. At no time should climbing spikes be used.

Q. Please give me a brief description of your formal training and practical experience.
A. A professional arborist will be proud of his background. While formal college level courses are not always necessary, a definite display of ongoing local and regional continuing educational courses is strong evidence of a progressive attitude and a desire for professional enhancement.

Q. (If appropriate for the intended work) Do you have the proper license for applying pesticides?
A. It is necessary for a commercial applicator of pesticides to have on his possession a current pest control card or business license which indicates his having satisfied the requirements for application.

Q. How long will the work take?
A. The professional arborist will be able to accurately estimate the length of the job and then stick to an agreed timetable.