



# TREES & THE LAW

BY JULIAN DUNSTER

## Assessing Tree Risk

### Training and experience are important

Assessing tree risk is a skilled task requiring knowledge of many aspects of arboriculture. Not only must the assessor understand tree biology and mechanics, but they must also be able to apply that knowledge in a wide array of situations.

The risk assessor needs to be able to read the condition of one or more trees and decide if any of the external features represent structural problems that increase the chances of the tree failing. The results of the risk assessment inform risk management; that is, the way in which the manager decides where to spend time and money. The risk manager relies on the assessor for factual and accurate information, and because this information has implications for human safety, the risk assessor shoulders a duty of care that is quite different from many other aspects of arboriculture.

*There will always be people who are very risk averse and seek a simple justification to remove trees.*

The basics of risk assessment, which used to be termed hazard tree assessment, are fairly simple, and are covered in the certified arborist exam. But until recently, the detailed skills and training materials needed to conduct really competent risk assessments has not been readily available as a comprehensive training course. That changed in 2004 with the introduction of the Certified Tree



Conditions affecting tree health, including confined root area that caused this tree to fail, are considered in the Certified Tree Risk Assessor program.

Risk Assessor qualification in B.C.

The course was developed with sponsorship from Worksafe British Columbia, BC Hydro, and the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture (PNWISA). Almost three years in development, with extensive input and peer review from arboriculture experts around the world, as well as detailed review by Worksafe BC staff, the course was launched in BC four years ago. The course is a combination of self study (the manual arrives four weeks before

the course), one day of extensive lectures reviewing the materials in the manual, a half day of field work, and a two and a half hour exam. To successfully pass the exam requires a mark of at least 85 per cent.

The interest in the course, which is owned and administered by the PNWISA, has been very strong, partly because there is nothing else like it, and partly because the entire training programme and qualification is recognised as an acceptable industry standard by Worksafe BC. In effect, those that pass the exam

become recognised by the provincial safety authority as being well qualified, and competent to conduct a thorough risk assessment in urban areas, and in the urban / rural interface. For the arboriculture profession the course has been a big step forward. There is now a single comprehensive course available where the many aspects required are brought together as an interdisciplinary programme. Many municipalities, and cities, such as the City of Seattle, have put their arborists through the course in order to take advantage of the new skills and qualification. The qualification is valid for a period of four years, after which the assessor must resit the exam.

As of summer 2009, there are over five hundred Certified Tree Assessors, distributed throughout B.C., Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Alaska. We have also had several people from Ontario, Alberta and California take the course, and this summer, two courses were successfully delivered to a government agency in Hong Kong.

One of the key philosophical underpinnings of the course is the way in which risk is discussed. There will always be people who are very risk averse and seek a simple justification to remove trees. However, there are often times when a careful, systematic, and thorough assessment, using the many sophisticated tools and techniques now available, can be used to reasonably justify reten-

tion of the tree. This is an important point. Condemning trees is easy. Having the confidence—backed up by strong technical evidence and knowledge—to recommend continued retention of trees requires a much higher level of skill. The PNWISA course is designed to give the student that skill.

An integral part of the risk assessor's job is to understand not only the arboricultural parts, but also the legal implications of the task, as well as the technical underpinnings of risk assessment. Taken together, these factors provide for a competent assessment that is (or should be) defensible in court. Of course, merely being Certified does not mean that everyone will always get their assessment 'right.' There may be occasions when previously unknown factors come to light after a failure. But, by raising the assessors skills to a new level, it is hoped that fewer trees will be removed simply because people fear them, and more will be retained as a result of a thorough and systematic assessment process that is based on sound science. For more information about the Certified Tree Risk Assessor programme visit the web site at [www.pnwisa.org](http://www.pnwisa.org) or contact Julian Dunster.

*Julian Dunster is the course designer, and lead instructor of the PNWISA Certified Tree Risk Assessor course. He teaches the course, and all aspects of risk assessment across North America, and delivered the course in Hong Kong in 2009.*

**2009 Catalog**

**BLUE RIDGE ARBORIST SUPPLY**

Call Now or Order Online!

1-800-577-TREE (8733)

[www.BlueRidgeArboristSupply.com](http://www.BlueRidgeArboristSupply.com)