

Dead Trees and Landscapes: What are You Advertising?

By Larry Caplan, Extension Horticulture Educator, Vanderburgh County, IN

For the Evansville Courier and Press, August 6, 2017

Over the last several weeks, I've spent a lot of time in Indianapolis, caring for my wife as she recovered from hip replacement surgery and the subsequent physical therapy. As I travelled back and forth from the medical facilities, I was struck by the large numbers of dead trees along city streets and highways, in front of businesses and restaurants, and in home yards.

A quick glance at the bark and branch structure confirmed that these dead trees were ash, and the obvious conclusion was that they had all been killed by emerald ash borer (EAB). As a reminder, EAB is an invasive insect that has recently been found in the Evansville area, and has already killed hundreds of millions of ash trees. This insect has been found in over 26 states, from Colorado to Massachusetts, Texas to Minnesota, and the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec.

Perhaps because I'm a card-carrying tree hugger, the sight of bare, dead trees in the middle of summer hits me harder than the average citizen. I think what bothered me the most, though, was that I saw no active tree removal in the areas I had to pass along. No grounds crews at the clinics or corporate buildings. No parks department or public works teams. No private tree trimmers.

Maybe they were all working on the other side of town, taking down trees that were more likely to fall and hurt people, or crash into houses. When a major disaster hits a community, priorities must be made to deal with the most dangerous sites first, and leave the purely cosmetic problems last.

But the impression it gave me, as an out-of-town visitor, was that nobody cared. "Meh. The trees are dead. Wonder how the Cubs are doing?"

As I wandered about, looking for non-hospital food, I had to wonder a few times if my GPS was leading me to a place that had gone out of business. Once the trees died, it seemed, many of these property owners seemed to figure "why take care of anything else?" Unmowed lawns, dying bushes, and wilting flowers don't make for good curb appeal for businesses or for people selling their homes. If you buy into the "broken windows" theory (go ahead and Google it), then having dead trees and landscapes may advertise to criminals that these properties are abandoned, or that the neighborhood is run-down and a perfect place to set up a meth lab.

The moral to this rambling column? Take care of your property. If you have ash trees, start now to decide if you want to keep them alive with chemical treatments. If not, start planning for their eventual removal. Examine the rest of the yard, and determine what will happen when the shade is gone. Trust me, folks: this is not a question of "if" the borers will kill the ash trees...the only question is "when?"