



TREE NEWS

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CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

PLANT HEALTH CARE

Plant Health Care (PHC) of woody ornamentals and trees is a management concept that has made its way into our landscapes over the past 40 years. Derived as a way to enhance maintenance and management practices for landscape professionals, the primary goal of PHC was to get people to look before they treat. Ultimately, PHC sought to prevent problems through proper planting practices, appropriate site selection, and improved maintenance techniques.

PHC has deep roots alongside Integrated Pest Management (IPM). Strategies for implementing landscape-based IPM programs included: cultural, mechanical, biological, chemical, and even regulatory. Yet, all the while, the focus of IPM remained on the pest. While PHC certainly has some focus on the pest, many PHC practitioners quickly learned that the plant and the client were just as important. Scouting and monitoring remained the mainstay for many PHC programs, though these processes would become much more refined over the years.

When asking the right questions of our clientele, we learn more about their perceptions and expectations, while that client continues to build confidence in us as PHC practitioners. From there, the plant should be evaluated carefully—what is the vitality, the vigor, the susceptibility to the pest, and has the plant succumbed to any damage that could be deemed a structural defect? Lastly, a keen PHC practitioner should carefully evaluate any and all evident stressors placed upon the plant. Any number of stressors may be evident (e.g., improper planting depth, poor pruning practices, compacted soils, poor drainage, mechanical damages, pest damages, or even physiological disorders due to pH imbalances or nutrient deficiencies). Quite often though, we see plants decline due to a stress complex (i.e., a culmination of stress factors that build up in the plant over time). We must evaluate how these stressors will ultimately impact the tree’s structure, vitality, and/or its appearance.

We lastly highlight ways PHC practitioners can monitor and mitigate stressors to vegetation:

- Expand the mulch ring around trees (typically 4–6 inches from the bark).
- Address potential soil compaction issues.
- When digging, smell your soil—earthy smell is good, sour smell is bad.
- During droughts, water the trees.
- Periodically inspect the leaves, bark, and trunk of trees for signs of pest and disease issues.
- Early detection of pest and disease may alleviate loss of that vegetation.

By understanding our client’s perceptions and expectations and the plant’s growth characteristics, and by accurately identifying stress factors, only then can we make the best decision for both the client and the plant.



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A topped Crape Myrtle. Topping negatively impacts the aesthetics, structure, and health of landscaped trees.

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