

Of Trees and Things

Frank Bolton

The *New York Times* ran an article by Jaren Diamond, a professor of geography at UCLA in its Tuesday Science section on January 29 this year which was entitled “That Daily Shower Can Be a Killer.” In essence, the article was about what Diamond calls constructive paranoia. Americans’ ranking of dangers tends to focus on events that are outside their control like plane crashes, terrorist attacks or mass shootings, events that either kill large masses of people at one time or that kill in spectacular ways. Diamond’s point is that the odds are much higher that someone his age (75) will slip and fall in the shower, trip over an uneven sidewalk, or tumble down a flight of stairs.

Diamond talks of going to New Guinea over the years and describes the first time that he was going to sleep out. He suggested to the New Guineans who were with him that they sleep under a large tree. They were adamant in their refusal and Diamond capitulated, sleeping in the open, something he did on every subsequent trip. Over the years, nearly every night, he would hear a tree fall somewhere. The New Guineans were practicing constructive paranoia.

My wife and I have quite a few experiences with trees over the past few years. New York City, as you know, gets hurricanes but is not known for tornados. But about two years ago in the fall, our house was in a photo on the front page of *The New York Times* after what I call a twister (I term I used as a young boy) raced up the block at an angle. It split a double trunked tree in a neighbor’s backyard in half. One half crushed the sheds



5th Street in Brooklyn, Fall 2011

attached to the rear of two brownstones and the deck of a third. It also smashed both the back wall and several windows of a house. Out front, four trees were knocked over or suffered enough damage to require them to be cut down.

Hurricane Sandy didn’t have too much impact on our neighborhood because we are on a hill but it destroyed over 300 trees in nearby Prospect Park’s 600 acres.

But much closer to you all are the expeiences we’ve had with trees on our property in Orient. Those of you who know our 100 x 115 foot lot by the shore line know that we have many trees on it. Looking at it, it is difficult to believe that we have about 19 fewer trees than we had when we bought the property nearly 30 years ago. A few have fallen, some have died and some we have taken down because they were a hazard.

The first tree we felled was a tall dead elm alongside the drive (the other dead elms came down within five years of our

purchase. I viewed them as a danger . . . I worked in the woods on my college’s property, on and off, for two years so I know a little more about trees than you would expect from a city boy.)

In the more recent past, we arrived one June to find shingles in our driveway. I looked at the roof and saw no missing shingles. The next day our cousin Jane came to say hello and said, “What happened to your roof?” The roof of the 4’ long entrance to our kitchen was partially staved in. The mystery shingles were explained.

In the ‘el’ formed by that entrace and the rest of the house stood a beautiful blue spruce tree, perfectly upright. When I examined the ground, half or more of the soil around the roots showed large cracks. A strong wind (someone suggested it was during a big blow the previous fall) had clearly tipped the tree into the house, broken part of the eave, and then abated so the tree became upright again. I had to take that 65’ beauty down — it was heartbreaking.

Starting about eight years ago, the white pine in front of our house began dropping branches onto the roof over the winter. I spoke with Mike Noble, the Orient Code Enforcement officer who looked at the tree and said it was still healthy. Because it was within the shore zone, I could not take it down.

The pine continued to drop branches on the roof (during one winter, it dropped four of them). Each year, they fell from higher and higher up. They fell if there was a lot of snow or if there was little snow. The tree was acting the same way a white pine I had taken down near the right of way had acted before it finally died.

I was out measuring the tree’s diameter one day when a workman next door said, “Planning on cutting that tree down?” It’s a lot easier to measure the diameter of a tree that is between 80 and 90 feet tall with two people on the tape measure. Steve Gray said he could take the tree down and suggested that it should be taken down — it was unstable because it had no branches on one side going up at least 45 feet (oddly, the tree never seemed to lose branches on the lake side). So last April, Steve dropped the tree onto the frozen lake and cut the trunk into three board lengths.

After issues with weight limits on the road and a question about whether or not the trunk would end up with blue mold, Joe Ledger from Amity took the trunks to Steve Hopkins’ sawmill in Hodgdon. Three boards are in our loft. We are waiting a few years for them to dry so we can have a table made. This summer, we will re-roof the camp because we simply cannot find several of the holes the tree’s branches poked into the roof. Like the 1950’s song “Mañana,” we only get water in the house when it rains (heavily). The tree, by the way, has about 85 rings.

And late last summer, the power company took down a dead tree and a badly leaning tree on the knoll up behind our house and we hired JMM out of Hodgdon to take down another four dead trees. We ended up with two 4’ high piles of chips.

Continued on the other side

The article in the NY Times appeared in May, 2012 and is still available on the Times website.

Back to *The New York Times*. In the spring of 2012, not too long after the twister came up our street, it ran an article on trees which described signs of trees that might be a menace. Here is a summary.

Cracks in Trunk or Limbs

Cracks can indicate decay and, depending on their location and size, will increase the risk of failure in the affected branch or the entire tree.

Dieback in Tree Canopy

Leaves at the top of a tree might start to bloom later in the spring and drop off earlier in the fall. Compared with nearby trees of the same species, the leaves are paler and smaller. These symptoms signal dieback, which occurs when a tree is under stress or in decline.

Water Sprouts

Sprouting from the trunk or main limbs of a mature tree, these new shoots are often benign, either a result of excessive pruning
Continued below address area

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or fresh exposure to sunlight. But they can also be a tree's last gasp for life — a sign of stress or dieback in the canopy.

Co-dominant Trunks

A tree with two trunks or limbs is vulnerable, especially when the crotch has a distinct V shape with bark that extends between the limbs.

Dangling Limbs

Trees with dead, snapped or dangling branches are likely to drop them, although it is hard to predict when. Storm damage is usually the culprit. [the accompanying photo shows a widow-maker, suggesting that the tree itself is likely healthy].

Turkey Tails

Fungi that grow on the trunks of hardwoods and shrubs are named for their fanlike, colorful shapes, which resemble turkey feathers. Also called sap rot, they colonize dead or dying wood. If found on living trees, they point strongly to disease or decay.

And about that daily shower that Jared Diamond mentioned in his article about constructive paranoia. My father served in the Marine Corps for four years. When I was about 11, he told me he had just gotten news that a Master Sergeant he knew had died. "It's ironic. He was in the war (WWI) and in battle elsewhere and he slipped on a bar of soap in the bathtub and broke his neck."