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ADVICE TO GROW BY » MASTER GARDENERS

How to tell if tilting tree is a hazard



There are ways to tell if a tree is in danger of falling. Be proactive to avoid hazards before they happen in the landscape around your home. PAUL KAZDAN / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Question: There are several large trees around my house. One has mushrooms growing around the trunk; another has begun to tilt toward the house. What do you suggest I do about them?

Answer: From what you describe, you're right to be concerned about the risk of damage or injury should one of your trees fall.

Each year in California, many trees fall or break apart, causing property damage, personal injuries and power outages. Although some tree failures are not predictable, you can prevent many by regularly inspecting your trees for common structural defects, especially before and after stormy weather.

It's easier to make corrections on young trees to prevent future hazards. You may need binoculars to inspect large trees, which have a greater hazard potential than small ones. Inspect large trees more frequently and in more detail. If you determine a tree may be hazardous, keep people, pets and vehicles away from it. Consult an International Society of Arboriculture-certified arborist for advice or work on your tree. If you see a hazardous condition, such as a downed power line, immediately contact your utility company. During your tree inspections, assess for these potential structural defects:

Leaning: A recent change in the vertical axis of the tree or exposed roots around the base of the tree are signs the tree is in the process of falling and can fall over completely at any time. Swift action is needed to either correct the lean or remove the tree. Note that some trees naturally do not grow vertically. If there hasn't been a change in the angle of lean, this is not a problem.

Multiple trunks: As the trunks push away from each other, some become weakly attached and prone to splitting, causing the trunk to fall. Inspect each trunk at the point of origin.

Weakly attached branches: Trees with many branches arising from the same point on the trunk tend to be weak and potentially hazardous. If one branch breaks, the others are more likely to fail. Inspect branches that are greater than 3 inches in diameter at their point of attachment.

Cavities and other evidence of decay: Mushrooms and conks — bracket-like growths on the bark of trees or on exposed roots — indicate root rot or wood decay. As the decay progresses, the wood weakens and failure is more likely. The location and size of these defects is important. Cavities or decay at the point where branches meet or at the base of the trunk are a concern. If the defect is large and at one of these structural locations, the tree is more likely to fail.

Trunk and branch cracks: Cracks confined to the bark are not usually a problem. Deeper cracks into the wood indicate that the tree has become structurally weakened. If you see a crack greater than 3 inches deep, it likely extends into the wood.

Broken branches: Remove any broken branches that remain attached to the tree as soon as possible.

Deadwood: Branches that have died will eventually fall off; the larger ones can cause damage. You should remove any deadwood immediately.

Resources

- Find an arborist at <https://bit.ly/3JiDvAE>
- How to check landscape trees for hazards at <https://bit.ly/3LKme5m>
- Photo guide to recognizing tree hazards at <https://bit.ly/3t29IMC>

Contributors to this week's column were Laura Eakin, Patricia Rosales and Robert Williams. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County (sonomamg.ucanr.edu) provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.