



IDENTIFYING COMMON HAZARDS IN TREES

By William Gordon





DEADWOOD

Deadwood is a common sign of declining branch health and a frequent cause of falling limbs. Look for branches with no leaves or buds in season, brittle twigs, peeling bark, or obvious discoloration compared with surrounding growth. Because dead branches no longer receive water or nutrients, they are more likely to snap in windy conditions, so early identification and removal helps reduce the risk of unexpected branch failure.



CO-DOMINANCE & V SHAPE UNIONS

Tight V-shaped forks and co-dominant stems (two similar-sized leaders growing from the same point) are common structural weak points. These often contain included bark, which prevents a strong natural union from forming. Look for narrow V-shaped junctions, visible bark trapped in the fork, cracks at the union, or two main stems competing upward. These features can increase the likelihood of splitting under wind or heavy loading, so early assessment and selective pruning can help manage the risk.



FUNGUS



Bracket fungi and mushrooms growing on the trunk, buttress roots, or major limbs can indicate internal wood decay. They commonly appear as shelf-like brackets, hoof shapes, clusters, or toadstool-type growths, and may be white, brown, orange, yellow, or black depending on the species. Fruiting bodies are most often found around the base of the tree, along the main stem, or on larger secondary limbs.

It is important to note that decay fungi can be present within a tree for many years before visible fruiting bodies appear, so the absence of mushrooms does not necessarily mean the wood is sound. While some fungi are relatively benign, others break down the structural wood of the tree, potentially reducing strength in the affected area. Where active decay fungi are present on structural parts of the tree, this can increase the likelihood of limb or stem failure over time.

CAVITYS & HOLLOW

Cavities and hollows are areas where internal wood has decayed, often visible as openings in the main stem or large limbs. They commonly form following old pruning wounds, storm damage, fungal decay, or long-term deadwood breakdown. Look for visible holes, dark recesses, soft or crumbly wood around openings, or areas where the trunk sounds hollow when gently tapped.

The presence of a cavity does not automatically mean a tree is unsafe. Many mature trees naturally develop hollow sections while retaining a strong outer shell of living wood. In many cases, if sufficient sound wall thickness remains (often referenced around one-third of the stem diameter), the tree can still maintain reasonable structural integrity. However, the size, location, and extent of decay are all important factors when assessing potential risk.



CRACKS & SPLITS

Cracks and splits in the main stem or large branches can be early indicators of structural weakness. They may develop due to storm loading, rapid growth stresses, weak unions, or underlying decay. Look for fresh vertical or horizontal splits, open seams in the bark, exposed wood, or areas where a fork or limb appears to be pulling apart. While minor surface cracking can be normal in some species, deeper or widening splits in structural parts of the tree can increase the risk of limb or stem failure over time.





EXCESSIVE LEAN & ROOT MOVEMENT

Trees do not always grow perfectly upright, and a natural lean can be a normal response to shading, prevailing winds, or the tree growing toward available light. However, concern arises where a tree has recently begun to lean or where the angle appears to be increasing. Look for signs such as lifted or cracked soil around the base, exposed or heaving roots, fresh soil mounding, or tension cracks in the ground. These indicators can suggest root plate movement and a potential reduction in stability, particularly following periods of wet weather or strong winds.





EXCESSIVE END WEIGHT & OVEREXTENDED LIMBS

Long, horizontal branches with dense growth concentrated at the tips can create excessive end weight. This increases leverage on the limb's attachment point, placing greater stress on unions during strong winds and inclement weather. Look for limbs that extend significantly beyond the main canopy shape, appear heavily weighted at the outer ends, or show signs of sagging. While trees naturally extend toward light, overextended limbs – particularly those with prior pruning wounds or minor defects – may be more susceptible to failure in adverse conditions.

IF SIGNS OF CONCERN ARE OBSERVED

Regular visual checks can help identify potential issues early. During the growing season, look for dead branches lacking foliage, and in winter watch for limbs that appear discoloured or lifeless. Use binoculars where necessary to inspect major unions for tight V-shaped forks, bulging, or other signs of weakness.

Where fungal growth is present, do not remove it – take clear photographs and note its location around the base, stem, and main limbs. For cavities and hollows, observe whether the wound appears to be naturally occluding and whether the surrounding wood feels sound. Where cracks or splits are identified, monitor whether they appear new, are widening, or differ from the tree's normal bark pattern.

If a tree has recently begun to lean, or if there are signs of root plate movement (lifting soil, exposed roots, ground cracking), keep clear of the area and seek professional advice promptly, particularly where the tree is within striking distance of buildings, vehicles, or frequently used spaces.

Similarly, long overextended limbs with dense foliage at the tips may benefit from professional pruning to reduce leverage and improve canopy balance.

Where there is any uncertainty, the safest course of action is to have a suitably qualified tree surgeon carry out a professional inspection and advise whether remedial work is necessary.





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