



Top Five Questions A Working Arborist Gets Asked by a Homeowner

By James Komen

1) "Is my tree safe?"

This question is a trap, whether the homeowner knows it or not. The homeowner is looking for a simple and quick answer: either "Yes, your tree is safe." or "No, you should cut it down." But most often, there is no clear and simple answer. Tree risk assessment requires managing uncertainty, so you will have to be clear about what you do and do not know.

Explain to the homeowner that tree risk involves three components: likelihood of failure, likelihood of impact, and consequences of failure and impact. Although one of these ratings may be high, the tree may not necessarily be a high risk. In the TRAQ methodology, there are four possible ratings for the likelihood of failure: imminent, probable, possible, and improbable. There is NO RATING for "Definite" or "Impossible." Emphasize to the homeowner that there is no guarantee of safety in any case. Memorize this risk assessment mantra and repeat it to all your tree risk assessment clients: "All trees pose risk, and the only way to eliminate all risk from trees is to eliminate all trees."

When homeowners ask about tree safety, often they are asking you to confirm their existing opinion about a tree. Before giving an answer, ask them for their personal thoughts. You don't want to unknowingly walk into a conflict between spouses or neighbors.

Your answer to this question should also clarify what qualifications you have. Don't be afraid to say what you do not know. If you are not Tree Risk Assessment Qualified or are not a consulting arborist, consider referring the homeowner to someone who is. Even if you hold these qualifications, make sure to clarify what you know and don't know about the tree and site. For example, if you're performing a visual-only assessment, often you don't have much information about the condition of the root system. If you're only assessing from the ground, you often don't have much information about branch attachments high in the crown.

Ultimately, your response should not be a mandate for a decision on how to manage the tree. Don't say, "This tree needs to be removed" or "This tree needs pruning and cabling." Instead say, "One option is to remove this tree" or "Another option is to prune and cable this tree." Your job as risk assessor is simply to offer options for mitigation and explain what effect they may have on the tree's overall risk rating. The decision of which mitigation option to choose is up to the homeowner or tree risk manager.

Be very careful not to guarantee anything by using definitive language such as "Your tree won't fail." or "Your tree will fail in the next five months." We never have all the information about a tree's mechanical properties, so we cannot be certain of any given outcome. All we can say is our assessment of the chance that the tree could fail. Consider using language such as "The tree may fail in ordinary weather conditions over the next five years." (Probable) or "The tree is unlikely to fail in the next five years, even in extreme weather conditions" (Improbable).

When a homeowner asks, "Is my tree safe?" Explain why that's a much more complex question than they realize. By spending the time to answer this question the right way, you'll build rapport and credibility with your clients, making them more loyal to you and your crew in the future.

2) "Is my tree sick?"

If you have expertise in the field diagnostics, now is a good time to shine. But most importantly, make sure you are clear about what you do and do not know.

Don't be afraid to send photos or samples to the local university cooperative extension or to a colleague to help you diagnose the issue. Instead of saying "The tree has phytophthora" (unless you are sure of your diagnosis), consider saying "The symptoms appear to indicate phytophthora." Misdiagnosis can result in ineffective, wasteful, or even damaging mitigation actions.

3) “How much do you charge to...?”

This question is often a trap, whether the homeowner realizes it or not. Determining a price cannot be done without agreeing upon a scope of work. Before you quote any price, try to learn as much as you can about the scope of work. Often, homeowners ask for a price even before they fully understand the scope of work they are asking for. Other times, they will ask for multiple contractors to provide bids, but the bids differ on scope of work. Make sure you are bidding on the same scope of work as the other contractors so the homeowner can compare prices apples to apples.

If a site visit is impractical, I usually recommend taking a look at photographs if they are available. Consider using Google maps Street view or inviting the homeowner to submit a few photos of the tree or trees via text or email. Even though photographs may give incomplete information, they can help inform your advice on whether the homeowner should proceed with the current proposed scope of work or if it may need to be modified.

In all cases, make sure you clearly document the agreed-upon scope of work and an email or a written contract. This protects both you and the homeowner from any disagreements that may arise in the future.

4) “Are you licensed?”

Many states have various rules regarding contractor licensing, some more strict than others. While states like Colorado require testing for competency in the field of arboriculture for tree service contractors, states like California only require insurance, bonding, and competency in insurance law for licensure in tree service.

Take the time to learn your state’s licensing requirements. Use this opportunity to explain to your client the difference between each level of certification through the ISA and how it differs from licensure with your state. Sometimes by outlining the different credentials and specialties, you will help the homeowners make better management decisions. Does the homeowner need a certified arborist? A certified tree worker? A Qualified Tree Risk Assessor? Or a Board Certified Master Arborist? Even if this means that that job ends up going to someone else, it’s better that you make sure your clients get the best possible service that meets their needs.

5) “Do you give free estimates?”

How you answer this question will depend on your business model. Some companies offer free estimates in an effort to interact with as many potential customers as possible. Free estimates give an opportunity to build rapport with potential clients, increasing the likelihood of a sale.

However, some homeowners use the word “estimate” when they mean “consultation”. They’ll ask for diagnostics, risk assessment, and other advice while you are on site. Make sure to clarify the purpose of your visit: the goal of an estimate is to learn the scope of work and produce a price. The goal of an estimate is not to provide management recommendations. Explain to clients when they reach that dividing line with their questions. Many arborists will charge for consultations because they are providing valuable information that assists homeowners in managing their trees. This information can then be used to direct other, less expensive crews. If you are a business owner, consider your decision carefully, and periodically reevaluate which strategy is more appropriate for your model.



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Eric Celmer: 208.863.9732 - ericc@wcnidaho.com
Carla Carter: 208.863.2350 - carlac@wcnidaho.com