

"Hello, Mrs. Smith."

This is Chuck Cissel calling from Guardian Tree Experts. I stopped by your home the other day to check your trees as part of our preventive maintenance program"

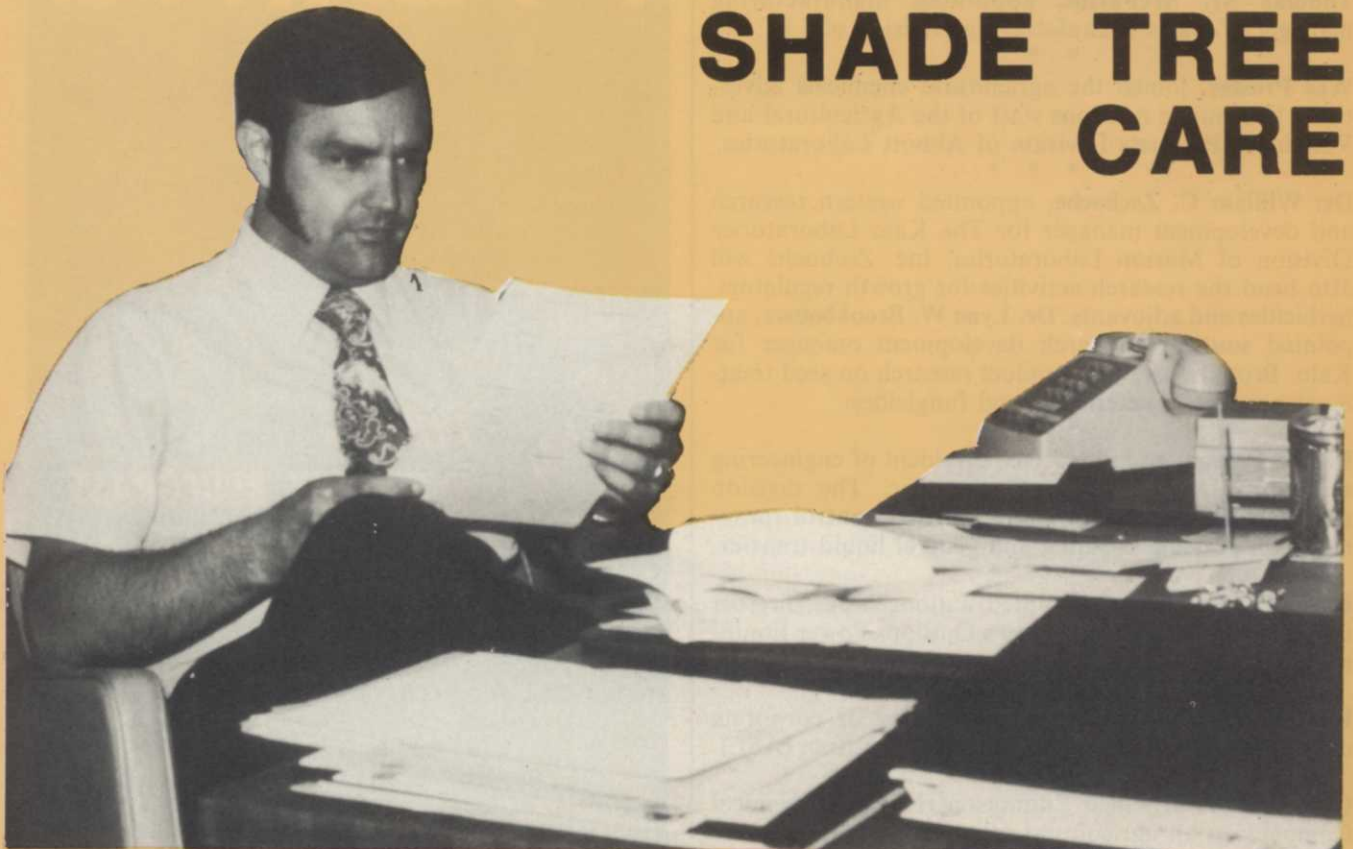
"... Yes, your trees basically look fine. But I did notice a small buildup of tent caterpillars in the two wild cherries in front. I'd suggest that we spray them before the infestation becomes too large and starts damaging the foliage."

"... We've used several products in the past. Malathion has given us good results and it is one of the best insecticides available. I'm sure you will be pleased with the results."

"... Another item I might suggest is that it is time to feed your trees again. If you remember, we fed them three years ago, and at the time I mentioned that we would contact you in another three years. I'd advise spraying the tent caterpillars this week and feeding all your trees later this fall. That will give them continued nutrition for another three years."

"... Fine, thank you. We'll have a spray crew over there Wednesday. Then we'll be back next spring to feed all your trees."

PRE-SELLING SHADE TREE CARE



THIS DIALOGUE is not uncommon. It goes on nearly every day at Guardian Tree Experts, a Maryland tree care firm serving metropolitan Washington, D. C. and surrounding counties. The conversation is built on the premise that homeowners are genuinely interested in keeping their shade trees and ornamentals healthy and free of insects and disease.

Woven cleverly throughout the dialogue is what Walt Money, president of the firm, describes as "finding out what people need and helping them to get it." This consists of pointing out a potential problem, reminding the client about tree nutrition, and generally looking after the short- and long-term maintenance of the homeowner's trees and ornamentals.

"We know that people love trees," says Money, "but few really know how to professionally care for them. Rather than wait for a panic situation or a costly take-down, I believe it is incumbent upon us as professional tree men to communicate the tree's needs to the client — not with hard sell tactics, but with a program of preventive maintenance or preservation principles.

"So early in our conversations we try to express to the homeowner that we are just as interested in his trees as he is. This reassures the client that he has made the right decision in hiring a professional tree care firm to handle the job. Then once this is established, we try to provide the most expert help available to solve the problem."

One of the techniques developed by Guardian Tree Experts is preselling this preventive maintenance program. It basically amounts to anticipating the need before the homeowner does and then educating him on what should be done. For some it may be cover sprays; others may need pruning and borer control; still others may need periodic insect control. Generally, however, Guardian Tree Experts attempts to presell the client on the tree's needs for one year.

How does preselling tree care work? "When we first started in business, we were quite aggressive," Money said. "We went out and knocked on doors, called prospective clients on the phone and wrote letters to solicit business. At that time, almost no job was too big for us.

"We kept good records on our clientele — a must if you plan to succeed — and after a time we began to note the trends that were occurring," he continued. "Much of our work each year was a repeat of the previous year. For example, we would spray for scale every year; bagworms and tent caterpillars could be predicted almost with regularity. Pruning deadwood from trees could be anticipated.

"We also discovered that too many tree men make the mistake of answering a call about a dead tree and just sell a removal," he said. "Too often when we'd go out on a job like that we'd end up asking ourselves: Why did the tree die? Are there others in danger? When were the trees fed last, if ever? What diseases and insects caused a weakening of tree vitality?

"Chuck Cissel and I put our heads together and decided that we could be of more service to our cus-

tomers if we could educate them on the concept of preventive maintenance. We could then presell the work as much as a year or two in advance. The work would be easier to do and the customers we serve would more tangibly appreciate what we try to do for them."

That's the image that now greets the customer on the phone or at the front door — one of genuine interest in the homeowner's needs, one that educates the client on professional shade tree care.

Behind this is a team of dedicated experts who must be constantly on their toes. Walt Money, Chuck Cissel and the other two partners, Charlie Weaver and Al Butler, must be virtually walking storehouses of knowledge and information to professionally answer the myriad of questions and problems that arise daily.

Guardian Tree Experts maintains close contact with specialists at nearby universities. They receive and digest reams of information from USDA, state departments of agriculture, chemical manufacturers, and from other professionals in the field. In addition, membership in organizations such as the National Arborist Association and the International Shade Tree Conference provides a good cross fertilization of ideas and a personal stimulation to maintain a professional status within the industry.

Because the field is so large, the four principals have tended to specialize. Money handles problems involving disease control; Butler and Weaver concern themselves with general tree care; and Cissel has become an expert on insect control.

"I generally develop an insecticide program that utilizes products which will do the job with the least toxicity and the lowest cost factor," Cissel said. "We follow the product label carefully and never try to deviate or take chances.

"For instance, if we spray a client's trees for bagworms, I use malathion at the recommended rate. Why? Simply because it is recommended by university entomologists and it is labeled by the manufacturer to do the job. Plus, we've found it to be an excellent material with low hazard to the applicator and relatively low cost to the homeowner."

Close rapport with entomologists and others who monitor insect infestations permits an almost daily input of what is expected to occur throughout the season. Likewise, cooperating with chemical manufacturers in establishing tests for new products helps the firm keep abreast of developments in the future.

All this behind-the-scene work pays off, too. Not only for Guardian Tree Experts, but for the homeowner. Six big ornamental shrubs located in one section of Washington, D. C. provides a good case in point.

Guardian received a panic call from the owner where the shrubs had browned out and appeared to be dying. Initial examination showed nothing, but Cissel decided to take an entomologist from the University of Maryland to the area. After observing the situation, the entomologist concluded that it was the most acute case of leafminer he had ever seen.

After reviewing literature and product labels, Cissel sprayed the shrubs with CYGON 2-E systemic insecticide and injected nutrients. Six weeks later the shrubs were green and bushy. Leafminers were not visible and the shrubs looked healthy once again.

Left: Walt Money, president, Guardian Tree Experts, Inc., reviews the records of clients to determine their needs. He takes much interest in finding out what people need and then helping them get it.

"The owners were extremely pleased with the results," Cissel said. "As a result, I presold a couple of sprays for the next year because leafminer is prevalent in the area."

The key to preselling is knowing what your customer's needs are. The idea is not to take advantage of the client. You do this only once. Rather, you presell a preventive maintenance program that will build on itself, one which will aid and care for the trees. The whole concept of preventive maintenance then is geared to preventing expensive takedowns and the resulting loss of trees. Nobody wants to lose trees; the homeowner gains no enjoyment by a costly removal.

"In preventive maintenance your first concern is for your client and their trees," Cissel said. "Keep this foremost in your head and you will make money."

Preselling preventive maintenance has other advantages, too. It permits close scheduling of like jobs. The

work for crews is not strenuous — no major equipment needed; tree accidents are fewer. (Guardian Tree Experts has employed women to work on the spray crew.) And preselling makes better use of available time.

"We've found that we could utilize our snow days in winter by preselling spring injections and spraying, both high profit items," Money said. "In fact, by using our records, we now can literally sell \$1,000 an hour on the telephone in the wintertime when the snow is blowing."

The benefits of preselling preventive maintenance are working well for Guardian Tree Experts. Their clients are pleased with the concept. The tangible results show that homeowners need and want and appreciate professional tree care. Finding out what people need and helping them get it can be a profitable way of doing business. Walt Money sums it up this way: "Our interest in the preservation of the homeowner's trees is more than genuine. It is our source of business in the years to come."



This crew professionally sprays a large hedge for aphid and mite control with malathion. Care is taken not to spray vegetation which may be adversely affected by these environmental protection chemicals.



The large pine in the foreground is heavily infested with insects. Guardian Tree Experts personnel were called after much damage had already taken place. Sprays to control insects and foliar fertilizer sprays were recommended.