ALTERNATE STRATEGY FOR ARBORISTS— TREAT THE TREE, NOT THE CUSTOMER

By David G. Nielsen, Ph.D., Professor of Entomology,Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center, Wooster, Ohio

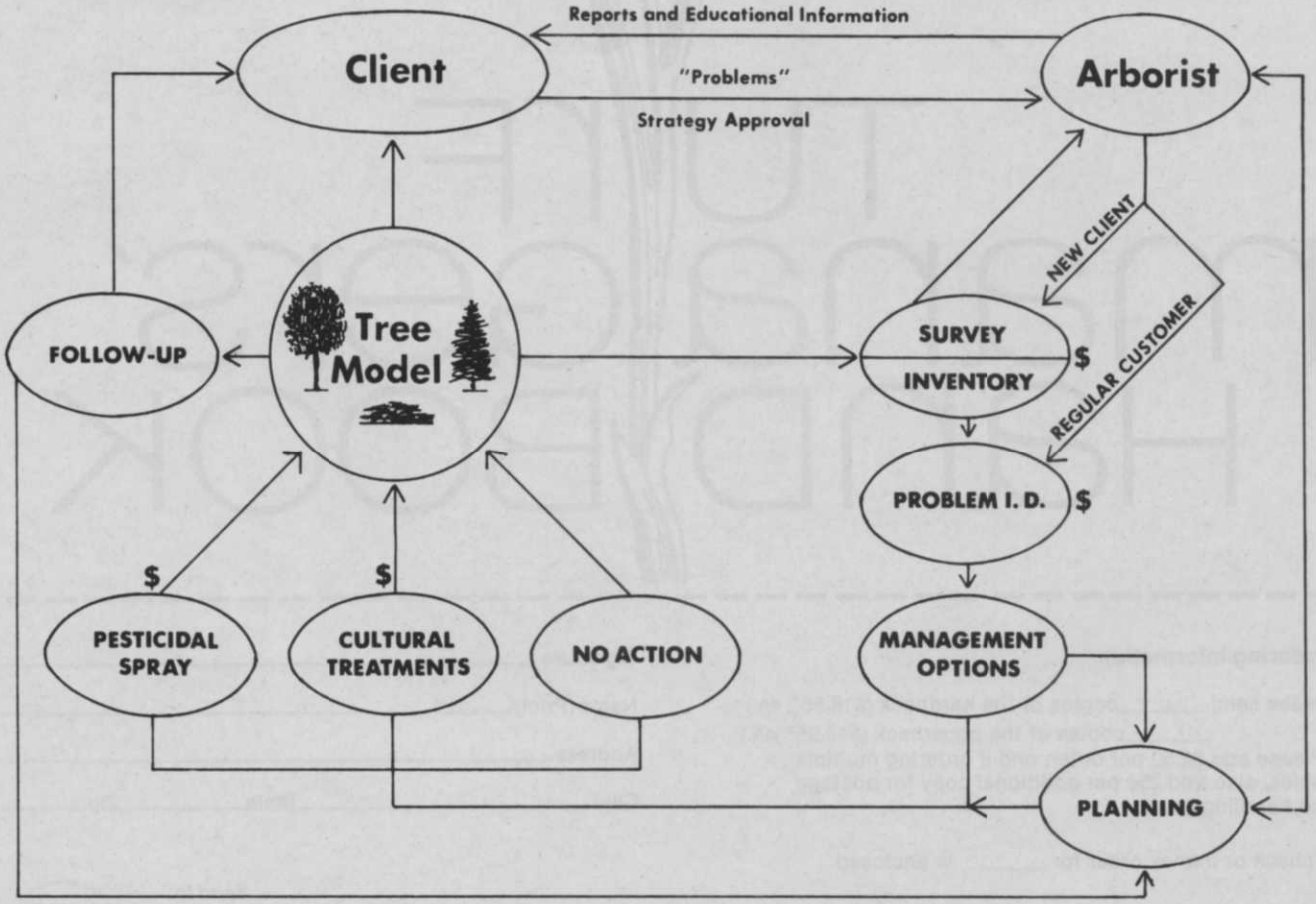
If the profession of arboriculture is healthy today, there is interest in improving professionalism. Clients are becoming more sophisticated and interested in their landscapes; consequently, there is need to re-examine the objectives of your service and how you achieve them. In this article, I will suggest a strategy for tree care that you may not have considered and your clients may not be ready to accept. However, client acceptance is part of the challenge.

I am issuing a challenge to change. My perspective is based on eight years of home ownership and studying insects on trees and shrubs since 1968. Although I'm not a practicing arborist responsible for managing a business operation that must turn a profit, I am a consulting entomologist and have become intimately acquainted during the past several years with arboricultural practices and problems. This article is intended to provide *food for thought*. It is not intended to criticize current practices or to suggest there is only one way to think about or implement pest control as part of an arboricultural service.

Targets and Goals

Most discussions of pest control begin with consideration of targets — specific insect, disease, and cultural problems. Perhaps entomologists and pathologists can be blamed but forgiven for this approach, because we are charged with developing pest control strategies. However, recently I have come to believe that optimization of pest control services can only be accomplished by considering trees and clients as the primary targets and pests as secondary factors to consider, only insofar as they impact trees and people.

Insects are more often people problems than tree problems. You may not agree with this assessment, but it is the way most of us have dealt with insects in the home and commercial landscape. We rely too much on pesticidal sprays and other remedial tactics to deal with pests. We are



Basic Model for Implementing Tree Health Care

Systematic approach to tree health care. Charge for services marked with $. Survey and follow-up are often neglected by landscape managers.

too ready to recommend or implement a spray program merely to soothe or diminish fears that our clients have for their trees. People often become so emotionally attached to their trees that management decisions are made without careful consideration.

The Quick Answer

I submit that most applications of pesticides to urban trees are unnecessary. They do little, if anything, to enhance tree vigor, and often have little impact on the pest's eventual population level, because sprays are used against harmless infestations or applied at the wrong time. The same is true in the lawn care industry. The so-called "preventive strategy" found acceptance at a time when scientific instrumentation was not sophisticated enough to detect low levels of pesticides in the environment. During the past nine years, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, prodded by environmentalist demands, has been reducing the pesticide arsenal available to the arborist and other landscape managers. We can expect this trend to continue.

You may argue that any sensible arborist would gladly eliminate a pesticidal application from his service, provided he could be assured that plant vigor would not be jeopardized. I tend to agree, since costs of pesticides have skyrocketed during the past few years. However, we continue to over-use pesticides.

An arborist from a leading national firm recently told me that most arborists know what to do, but there just isn't time to do it. *That's what this article is about:* deciding what needs to be done and doing it.

Let's forget pests for a minute and consider the target — the tree. Can we begin to think in terms of *Tree Health Care* (to borrow a phrase from Dr. C. C. Powell, Plant Pathologist at The Ohio State University and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center). I'm suggesting that we de-emphasize pests and concentrate on developing a holistic or comprehensive landscape management strategy, much as physicians are beginning to emphasize holistic medicine.

Tree Health Care Approach

In this new scheme, trouble-shooting, the art of using training and experience to diagnose a problem and prescribe a solution, will be necessary, but mostly for new clients. You will become so familiar with the landscapes of your regular customers that developing pest populations or infections will usually be detected before damage occurs or clients become alarmed.

Scheduled maintenance will optimize tree health, thereby minimizing pest problems. Customers will be paying for inspections and early detection rather than chemical sprays. The consultation segment of your business will be expanded as you learn how to manage a landscape and optimize pest control services. To do this, you may need to develop a new service ethic: one that emphasizes personal and public service, not necessarily pesticides.

I realize that many initial contacts result from some real and some imagined crises. This will undoubtedly continue. However, once you've controlled your clients "brush fire" you have an opportunity to sell your landscape service.

Are homeowners and managers of institutional landscapes ready to buy the concept of tree health care? I think some of them are now and that many others will be in the near future. Success of companies that provide a tree health care service tends to support this thought. There is certainly a significant segment of potential clients who have not contacted an arborist or pest control operation, because they hesitate to support use of conventional insecticides. A few newcomers to the plant maintenance industry are courting this untapped segment of our society by using titles that project an image of "organic" service practices. Recently, employees of such a firm requested that I familiarize them with alternative pest control practices. During our rather brief discussion, I learned they are more than willing to implement conventional pesticidal sprays, if other tactics are not effective. These people are selling a preventive health care program and using all available tactics to promote tree vigor. You can sell the same service by becoming thoroughly familiar with plant-pest relationships and organizing an educational program to sell your new product — Plant Health Care — not a pest control service, to potential clients. Perhaps highly professional arborists have been operating this way. If so, then many will be in agreement with me and wondering why I think I'm challenging them with something new. However, based on conversations with arborists, I know that many practicing today have not approached their work in the way I'm suggesting.

A basic model for implementing tree health care places your client at the top because he/she is the most important component. Trees don't pay arborists' fees, people do. So, we must keep our client's satisfaction in mind at all times. The tree occupies the center of the schematic because that is what we'll manage, not insects.

Health care service begins with a survey of the client's landscape that includes an inventory of all trees according to species, size class, and condition. Note physical factors that may influence tree vigor and implementation of management practices. The property analysis is prepared and submitted with a bill to the client. At the same time, a tree health management strategy is pro-

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posed that includes at least spring and fall tree inspections. If the client accepts the proposal, every effort is made to keep the client informed about all activities provided through the service. Regular contact, especially when little spraying occurs, is essential to customer retention.

After completing the tree inventory and signing the customer to your service, make sure you are familiar with all cultural and pest problems common to trees in your geographical area. The knowledge required to make good management decisions comes only from study, on-the-job training, and experience. However, the initial survey and inventory for which you charge a fee will improve the ability of even relatively inexperienced arborists to make rational decisions, because they will have enough lead time, before action is required, to consult research and extension specialists in agronomy, horticulture, plant pathology, and entomology to learn how to combat pests detected.

Problem identification will become mostly routine and is included in the standard fee, unless you are called by the client between scheduled surveys. Background information previously obtained about insects in your area has already prepared you for consideration of management options, based on pest density and your client's attitudes. Next, you plan an action strategy that may include no action, cultural treatment, or application of an insecticide.

The "no action" option may be the best approach. However, this decision must be explained carefully, so the client respects and trusts your recommendation, rather than contacting another arborist or pest control operator who may be less informed and more than willing to apply an unnecessary treatment for a fee.

Follow-up is critical to determine if tactics employed caused the desired result. You should include the cost of follow-up in your fee for implementation of any tactic. Communication of results to clients is crucial for maintaining confidence in the program and its practioners.

Detection of pest infestations before they become damaging, and awareness of management options before a control tactic is required, are the keys to effective pest control as part of quality tree care. Tree health care as a strategy for optimizing pest control services requires state-of-the-art familiarity with pests and trees. This is a professional challenge to modern arboriculturists.

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