

Early arrival at job site prevents damage to trees

Trucks, concrete, soil compaction, collisions. Fencing in trees and advising workers can keep the arbor green.

By James E. Guyette

■ Advance planning is crucial for landscape managers who are entrusted with the care of trees and other plant materials at a construction site. Preservation efforts and later new-planting projects will go much smoother and be more successful if the building crews are enlisted to cooperate with the task from the beginning.

"If you're landscaping a construction site, you'd better get there early enough to lay down the law to the construction workers," says Randy Zondag, extension agent for commercial horticulture/natural resources development in Lake County, Ohio.

Directing construction workers can require some delicate social skills, and it certainly helps to have the developer take an active role, he says. "Take your customers for a walk and show them what happens."

Zondag suggests you point out the trees that are being marked for saving, and note how the roots and other features can be harmed if the proper procedures are not followed. The developer should then notify the crews that you'll be on-site and issuing instructions.

One of the most basic techniques for saving a tree is simply erecting a fence. "Many



Older trees are less tolerant of abuse than younger trees.

times, all construction people will do is protect the trunk," Zondag explains. This is not enough. A circular fence with a radius one-and-one-half times the height of the tree should be spaced from the trunk. (A 30-foot tree gets a 45-foot radius fence.)

The key is to then keep people and materials out from behind the fence. "Nobody goes inside these fences. That tree site should not be desecrated," Zondag stresses. In addition to being the first thing up, "the fence should be the last thing taken down when the contractor leaves the site."

Penned in—The fence issue is more important than it might seem because trees hold such an attraction for contractors. A tree can serve as an umbrella for protecting bags of cement or stacked bricks and wood; and it makes a handy garage for parking vehicles. The damage done is usually not obvious at the time. "A tree doesn't die right away—it takes time for a tree to die," says Zondag. While a lot of people think the opposite, "the older the tree is the less it can tolerate."

Soil compaction can be the No. 1 enemy of a tree. According to Zondag, 90 percent of the roots that absorb nutrients are within the top four inches of soil.

Compaction means less air and pore space, less water-holding capacity and increased mechanical resistance. Roots can

then move upward into sidewalks and other unsuitable locations.

Passing pick-up trucks and the stacking of blocks can have similar results. Piling up bags of cement can create concrete problems for a landscape manager charged with preserving a tree. Spilled material can poison the soil and thus the tree.

Also, "We have a lot of people who like to burn debris on-site," says Zondag. "In addition to harming the top of the tree the ash will alter the chemistry of the soil." Even burying empty cement bags can shift the pH level and either kill the tree or mandate soil replacement efforts.

Covering up—Debris should be carted off-site if any type of planting program is planned.

"Trash at construction sites is a critical problem down the road for landscapers," says Zondag. Many times plants will refuse to thrive atop a long-forgotten underground trash heap. A favorite burial spot for contractors is right along the structure's foundation—right about where most people want their gardens.

—James E. Guyette is a freelance writer specializing in the green industry. He is based in South Euclid, Ohio.