



Anatomy of an accident

The huge dead limb shifted and crashed, without warning, to the dried leaf litter covering the soft earth on the other side of the towering oak. It happened in the blink of an eye. Almost simultaneously, we heard a grunt, as if somebody had been struck with something heavy. It was followed by a groan and then a hoarse, frightened cry: “*Get it off of me! Get it off of me!*”

The limb — thicker than a large man’s thigh — had pinned a young worker against the other side of the mature oak, where three equally young co-workers had been attempting to dislodge the gnarly, twisted chunk of wood. The limb, which had been wedged just above the workers’ heads in the crook of the oak, weighed 500 lbs. or perhaps a bit more.

I witnessed this accident, and have since often replayed it in my head, considering what I could have done or said to have prevented it.

Consider the accident’s anatomy:

As three young workers put their shoulders to the limb and pushed to dislodge it, their co-worker had, in an attempt to help extricate the massive branch, moved to the other side of the oak, the side where it was meant to drop. When the limb released from the oak’s crotch so suddenly — almost to the surprise of everybody — it pinwheeled awkwardly from its perch, slamming their friend to his knees and crushing his upper body against the oak’s trunk.

Sensing what had happened and hearing their colleague’s pleas for help, the small group of us

pushed the huge limb off of the young worker. Released from the tree, the young man painfully discovered he could barely move his left arm. All of us feared he had broken his collarbone or a bone in his left shoulder. Fortunately, he had not. I later learned that he had sustained muscle bruises — and being young and strong, he quickly recovered and was back at work.

Far less fortunate are the more than 200 landscape workers who will die on the job this year, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). This is a hard, cold fact. It happens every year.

It is also unacceptable. Our industry is sustaining far too many fatalities, even when you take into account that most of the work is done using powerful and potentially dangerous equipment in often environmentally demanding conditions.

Time to reduce the numbers

To reduce the level of fatalities in this industry, it starts by training employees to recognize and avoid the potential dangers inherent in the tasks they perform. Let’s not assume this can be done in a single morning or a single day. Safety training is ongoing and, considering the consequences, requires weekly — if not daily — education and reminders of specific hazards.

Fortunately, none of us have to go it alone or invent a new training program. The Professional Landcare Network (PLANET) has helped hundreds of landscape companies through its Safety Training Achieves Remarkable Success (STARS) program, which is still going strong. Check it out at PLANET’s website: LandcareNetwork.org.

As I learned from my recent experience with the young guys freeing the huge limb, the anatomy of an accident is remarkably easy to reconstruct after it happens. It’s much better to be trained to recognize a hazard and respond to it appropriately so you’re not left wondering (as I was) what you could have done differently.

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