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Arborists strive to save trees rather than cut them down

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Standing on the ground next to a 100-foot-tall oak tree, it's hard to see what might be ailing the colossal plant.

Just like a doctor would be ill-suited to diagnose a patient from across the street, arborist John Hawkins needs to get up to the heart of a tree.

He needs to examine the trunk, the limbs, the leaves. He needs to get into the canopy.

Strapped into a harness and using a system of ropes and pulleys, Hawkins and his team of climbers, Chris Crawley and Justin Neeley, swing up into the branches.

Like trapeze artists, they rotate around the tree, compiling a three-dimensional look at it and making the necessary cuts to save the tree.

"When you're a kid, climbing trees is fun. Now I get paid for it," Hawkins said.

He describes himself as tree doctor and can make diagnoses just by looking at a tree. He prefers to see trees not in a collective sense but as individuals in need of specialized care.

"Each tree has its own unique qualities and things you have to do for it," he said.

His day-to-day business means looking at trees individually.

Hawkins examines the trunk, looking for cracks, indications of insect activity and other problems. For example, the presence of cankers, areas where bark is sunken or missing, is a sign of disease or distress.

Arbor Experts employee Chris Crawley uses a chainsaw to trim off a broken branch from a tree in Franklin. The company has been hired to inspect the city's trees.

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Arbor Experts employee Chris Crawley repels up a sugar maple tree in Franklin to examine how hollow the tree is. The company is evaluating trees in the city and repairing damage when necessary.

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dressing in a tree.

"It's like cutting your arm open and pouring salt in," he said.

He said many of Franklin's trees, including maples, red oaks and ashes, are in good shape. He can work with the ones that aren't. Disease can be righted with nutrient injections and careful tending. A cable can help hold an ailing branch up.

The key is not cutting down a tree at the first sign that something is wrong, he stressed.

"Most of time, I'm cleaning up messes," he said. "If you give me a disease, I can fix it. If you give me something a man's done to the tree, I have to

He looks at the roots. If they're pithy and white, the tree is hurting. Mushrooms reveal the possibility of decay.

To keep his standing as a tree expert, he needs to be certified every other year by the International Society of Arborists.

Through a test that lasts more than three hours, Hawkins demonstrates his knowledge in the fields of biology, botany and forestry. He's quizzed on proper tree care, pruning methods and cabling techniques.

Hawkins has been an arborist for about 20 years and has been involved with trees, either in logging or trimming, for most of his life.

He admits he didn't know what he was doing for the first six years of his arborist career. It wasn't until he met with other professional arborists and watched them operate that he began to get a clear idea.

He soaked up literature and research from around the country. The writings of Alex Shigo, dubbed the father of modern arboriculture because of his work dissecting trees, are like gospel to Hawkins.

When Hawkins speaks about trees, his passion and enthusiasm are evident. He rails vehemently against "topping," a process where large branches are lopped off, leaving open wounds that make the tree susceptible to disease.

Topping is used to rein in a tree's foliage, but Hawkins said the plants were never intended to be without canopies.

"I always figure, if God or Mother Nature made the tree, they probably did it right. So why would you turn it into a bush? Buy a bush if that's what you want," he said.

Topping also reduces a tree's ability to absorb the energy from wind and violent storms.

The workers at Arbor Experts do not use spikes when climbing, since poking 1,500 holes in a living thing doesn't make much sense, he said. And he cannot fathom why people pour foreign substances like cement or wound

rejuvenate it."

Hawkins doesn't look to cut down trees just because they're perceived as too near houses.

He could see clearing some minor branches back if they are causing damage, but he'd "rather move the house."

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