

Plant Health Care

Spring weather is finally here, and you are likely spending more time outside tidying up and maintaining your landscaping. Spring is the right time of year to address the topic of Plant Health Care (PHC). PHC can be defined as a process of scheduled preventative maintenance based on routine monitoring and the use of environmentally sensitive practices and treatments to improve plant health.

Unfortunately, homeowners often do not recognize a problem until it is severe, which may require many treatments over several years, or worse yet, results in tree or landscape removal. Mature trees roots share the soil space occupied by other plants such as shrubs, perennials, annuals, and turf grass, which directly compete for water and nutrients. Any treatments applied to turf grass (herbicides and fertilizers) can possibly have a negative impact on the trees. Conversely, treatments applied to trees, such as pruning or fertilizing, can also influence the appearance of turfgrass. Properly maintained trees and shrubs can last a lifetime. If not properly cared for, trees and shrubs can take a lifetime to replace. However, herbaceous plants and turf can be replaced in a single growing season. Homeowners generally spend more money maintaining their turf than on maintaining their trees and landscaping despite properly maintained trees contributing about 10-15 times more to their property value than well maintained turf.

Hiring an International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) Certified Arborist or American Society of Consulting Arborists (ASCA) Registered Consulting Arborist is a good first step in establishing a PHC program that can be tailored to fit the homeowner's needs. Each PHC plan will involve site visits to monitor tree and shrub health. Monitoring frequency may be as simple as one annual visit to check on a single high valued tree or more frequent quarterly inspections of all trees and shrubs. During monitoring visits, an arborist will be able to observe any potential problems before they become too severe and make recommendations for treatments. A simple solution may involve reducing lawn irrigation frequency. Less frequent but longer irrigation applications encourage deeper rooting. A more complex solution may include soil decompaction within a tree's critical root zone, using a high-powered air excavation tool such as an AirSpade® to remove the existing compacted soil and then apply organic matter.

A certified arborist can also recommend appropriate native species of trees and shrubs, as well as determine appropriate planting locations where they will thrive. Should you replace a group of shrubs with another more disease-resistant type or keep treating the shrubs you have? A certified arborist should review all current lawn care management treatments to ensure they are not harmful to trees and shrubs and adjust as necessary. Cultural practices that should be considered include proper watering during dry periods (see July 2018), proper mulching (see Sept. 2018), and fertilizing. Please note that fertilizer is often not necessary in the landscape. Pruning can be prescribed to achieve many different objectives such as clearance, crown elevation, deadwood reduction, or structural pruning for young trees. Improper pruning can be detrimental to tree health (see Feb. 2019). Lastly, Integrated Pest Management (IPM) should be used to monitor for insects and disease that are more than simply a nuisance and treat as necessary.

Happy spring and gardening to you all!

Sustainable Landscaping

By Nick Drunasky



Rhododendron periclymenoides, pink azalea. Nick Drunasky