



## Summer Branch Drop

A Known Unknown of Tree Risk Assessment – When is it proportionate to reduce the risk from summer (or sudden) branch drop?

Tree owners will take a range of approaches to managing risks from trees, but the objective is usually to maintain a reasonable balance between the risks and the benefits from trees, and at a proportionate cost. Whether we own a single tree or manage a large tree population, there is an expectation that we will act proportionately, considering the risks and accounting for the benefits from the trees. In an area with low levels of human access, we might know intuitively that most trees do not require a second thought, and so consider the stability of only those trees adjacent to busier roads, car parks, residential boundaries, and other more heavily used areas. On the other hand, retention of a large dead tree in a densely populated area might be clearly unacceptable, or its management will at least require a bit of thought.



Other than the glaringly obvious - and interestingly, most high risk trees are - assessing the likelihood that a tree or branch will fail usually requires the skill and knowledge of an experienced arborist or forester. They will take a view of the tree and identify either that there is nothing of concern, or that there are signs of structural problems that should be remedied or investi-

gated. This process relies on the recognition and evaluation of visible defects or indicators of hidden defects.



While most tree and branch failures are initiated by wind loading, some are brought about by static loading from snow or ice, or even by the weight of the branch alone. When branches fail under their own weight, failure often occurs during or immediately following a period of prolonged drought with unusually high temperatures and this has resulted in the development of terms such as 'summer branch drop' and 'sudden branch drop' (sbd). Over the past few decades, there has been some speculation as to the factors involved in sbd but there is no substantive published research. Anecdotal evidence indicates that these failures are probably related to fluctuations in the moisture content of wood, and often appear to be associated with other features such as decay, pre-existing cracks and acute forks.

How are we to identify trees that are susceptible to sbd, let alone assess their potential for failure? It has been suggested that we might focus our attention on particular species that are thought to be susceptible to sbd and even that we can prevent these failures by lightly pruning susceptible trees. This approach would require large-scale interventions because there is currently no accepted way of identifying the individual trees that are at greater risk of failure due to sbd. Basing risk control measures on flimsy evidence is

## Events Calendar

### UNITED KINGDOM

#### St. Albans

21 Oct 2014 - QTRA Training

22 Oct 2014 - VTA Training

#### Grantham

03 Nov 2014 - QTRA Training

04 Nov 2014 - VTA Training



#### Exeter

04 Nov 2014 - QTRA Training

05 Nov 2014 - VTA Training

06 Nov 2014 - QTRA Update

#### Winchester

11 Nov 2014 - QTRA Training

12 Nov 2014 - VTA Training

not a proportionate response to the very small overall risk presented by sbd, which after all can only be identified with hindsight, and even then only speculatively.

In exceptional situations, where a tree exhibits a particularly high rate of recurring sbd failure, it may be reasonable to seek a reduction in the risk. Otherwise, it is unlikely to be proportionate to prune trees, erect warnings, or restrict public access to reduce the risk from sbd. A more reasonable approach is to carry out risk assessments based on what we know and to implement proportionate risk control measures. Arborists and foresters can communicate to tree owners that there is high uncertainty in assessing the risk from sbd and advise on how proportionate risk management decisions might be achieved, but we should avoid propagating the belief that sbd is somehow foreseeable. Instead, we should seek to educate tree owners and the public that the failure of trees is inherently unpredictable, and that while we can manage high risks, we should leave to fate those low risk situations where the associated benefits far outweigh any likely harm.

## The Budget Battle

In the present economic climate, budgets are tighter than ever. With hundreds of councils across the UK having to make further cuts, essential tree safety inspections are taking a back seat. Rumours of asset transfers, budget reductions and redundancies throughout councils pose an issue to those responsible for tree management. Not only does this put strain on staff, but the pressures of mitigating risks from trees which pose higher risks to the public such as along highways and public parks is important to consider.

In 2012, a car and its driver were crushed by a tree at Bracknell Forest. Following the death, only a couple of weeks ago, the Coroner for Berkshire Council issued a 'Prevention of Future Deaths Report (PFD) in order to prevent similar failures to be repeated. The inquest revealed that tree inspections had not been carried out for seven years, and so regular tree inspections are essential. However,

with staff shortages in many local authorities, this is easier said than done.



Instead, councils are having to turn to self-management and in-house training. This is where QTRA comes into play. Following a one-day course and a yearly license fee of just £85.50 + VAT, the registered user may quantify risks and prioritise works according to risk of harm, thus allocating resources more effectively. QTRA enables staff to stay up to date at a reasonable cost with tree safety management whilst fulfilling the council's duty of care.

## The VETree Project

'Vocational Education and Training on Veteran Trees'

Over the past twenty years, veteran trees have entered the consciousness of the arboriculture industry. Part of our cultural heritage and providing habitat for a wide range of rare and threatened species, veteran trees are themselves under threat across Europe, and there are moves to raise awareness of their value, secure their protection and manage them appropriately for the future.

Funded through the Leonardo da Vinci Programme for vocational education and training, as part of the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme,



## Events Calendar

### AUSTRALIA

#### Perth

03 Dec 2014 - QTRA Training  
04 Dec 2014 - VTA Training  
05 Dec 2014 - QTRA Update

#### Adelaide

09 Dec 2014 - QTRA Training  
10 Dec 2014 - VTA Training



#### Melbourne

15 Dec 2014 - QTRA Training  
16 Dec 2014 - VTA Training

#### Sydney

18 Dec 2014 - QTRA Training  
19 Dec 2014 - VTA Training

the VETree project is an initiative set up by five partner organisations with the aim of developing a Europe-wide programme of training in veteran tree management.

The training programme includes both basic and advanced training material, online training tools and mentoring. In September, Mike Ellison completed the VETree 'Train the Trainers' course held over three days at Epping Forest in London, and found this to be a valuable programme, supported by excellent course material.

The project is seeking to spread the existing knowledge about veteran tree management as widely as possible. Innovative management techniques need to find their way to all the stakeholders in veteran tree management. VETree is engaging with land owners, farmers, foresters, ecologists, advisors, arborists and tree managers (private and public).

So if you are involved with veteran trees as a landowner or advisor, you could benefit from this project. We will be scheduling some one-day training workshops in the UK for 2015. The workshop introduces you to the management of veteran trees, looking not only at how they can be conserved but how we can improve continuity of the valuable and often rare habitats they provide. Contact Mike ([mike@qtra.co.uk](mailto:mike@qtra.co.uk)) if you would like to run a training event for your organisation.

For more information and resources for veteran tree management visit the VETree website (<http://www.vetree.eu>) and Ancient Tree Forum ([www.ancient-tree-forum.org.uk](http://www.ancient-tree-forum.org.uk)).

## QTRA Training

QTRA training dates have been scheduled in the UK and Australia.

If you are responsible for trees, why not consider Quantified Tree Risk Assessment training or an update to keep up to date with recent QTRA developments? QTRA is ideal for tree managers wishing to gain a better understanding from the risks from falling trees. Unlike many other methods, QTRA quantifies risk giving probabilities, therefore allowing the tree manager to allocate resources effectively, depending on the risks of harm posed by trees across the site.



With over 1600 people trained in the method, alongside continuous improvements, we have received some excellent feedback over the years. If you are interested in further information or to want to find out which of the workshops are most suitable for you email [admin@qtra.co.uk](mailto:admin@qtra.co.uk).



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