Why Limbs Fall In Your Yard

Travel around a neighborhood after a storm and you will see tree limbs, large and small, scattered about the ground. Why do some limbs fall in high winds or after a severe storm while others merely bend? Should you worry about that large limb overhanging your driveway? "One reason trees fail is weak branch unions." Homeowners can educate themselves about tree limbs, but they should call a professional arborist if they are worried about an overhanging branch.

Trees may suffer from naturally formed imperfections that can lead to branch failure at the union of the branch and main stem. There are two types of imperfections that create week unions; a branch union with included bark and an epicormic branch.

Weak Unions

Branch unions can be characterized as strong or week. Strong branch unions have upturned branch bark ridges at branch junctions. Annual rings of wood from the branch grow together with annual rings of wood from the stem, creating a sound, strong union all the way into the center of the tree.

A weak branch union occurs when a branch and stem (or two or more co-dominant stems) grow so closely together that bark grows between the, inside the tree. As more and more bark is included inside the tree, the weak union is formed that is more likely to fail.

In storm damage surveys conducted, 21 percent of all landscape trees that failed in windstorms failed at weak branch unions of co-dominant stems. Some species are notorious for having included bark: Green ash, boxelder, willow, red maple, silver maple, Amur maple, cherry, canyon sycamores and oaks.

Epicormic Branches

Epicormic branches (also called water sprouts) are formed as a response to bad pruning, injury or environmental stress. Epicormic branches are new branches that replaced injured, pruned or declining branches. Commonly, epicormic branches form on the stems and branches of toped trees. When old, large epicormic branches are growing on decaying stems or branches, the epicormics are very likely to fail. Epicormic branches, by their very nature, form weak unions because they are shallowly attached instead of being attached all the way to the center of the stem.

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