Walk any neighborhood after a storm or during spring cleanups and you will hear confident advice about trees that ranges from helpful to hazardous. After two decades working as an arborist and managing crews for a tree service company, I have watched well-meaning myths cause expensive damage, shorten tree lifespans, and create safety risks that never needed to exist. Good tree care blends biology, physics, and practical experience. Bad advice often sounds simpler and cheaper, right up until a limb falls through a roof or a mature oak declines beyond recovery.

The stakes are real. A mature shade tree can add several thousand dollars in property value and reduce cooling costs by measurable margins, especially when sited on the south or west side of a home. Conversely, a neglected or poorly handled tree can turn into a liability overnight. What follows is a candid tour through the myths I encounter most often in local tree service work, along with the methods that consistently hold up in the field.



Myth 1: Topping a tree makes it safer and smaller

Topping, sometimes called “hat-racking,” means cutting large branches back to random stubs across the canopy. The logic seems straightforward: remove height, remove risk. In practice, topping turns a structurally sound tree into a future hazard. Those stubs will flush out vigorous shoots known as epicormic sprouts. These sprouts grow fast, often several feet in a growing season, and anchor weakly in the remaining wood. Within three to five years, the tree has regained much of its height with far weaker attachments. Under wind load or ice, those shoots tear out like loose screws pulled from drywall.

A professional tree service uses reduction pruning and structural thinning instead of topping. Reduction pruning targets specific limbs to reduce sail without butchering the canopy. We cut back to a lateral branch that is at least one-third the diameter of the limb being removed. This preserves energy flow and encourages strong wound closure. The cost can be higher than a quick topping job, but the result is a stable, natural form that actually reduces risk.

Myth 2: A tree that looks healthy must be healthy

Trees are long-lived organisms adept at hiding stress. I have inspected maples with lush green canopies that failed within months due to an unseen girdling root or internal decay. Visual vigor can mask serious structural or vascular problems, especially in species prone to compartmentalized rot.

An arborist service relies on more than a glance. We tap trunks with a mallet to listen for hollow tones, probe the root flare for circling roots, and look for subtle canopy signs such as reduced leaf size, delayed bud break, or dieback at the tips. In commercial tree service contracts, we often pair these observations with decay detection tools or targeted resistograph testing when warranted. In residential tree service, we build a history across seasons, because change over time tells us more than a single snapshot. A **Roanoke VA tree service** tree service company that offers ongoing tree care visits can catch issues early, before decline becomes irreversible.

Myth 3: Trees take care of themselves

Native trees evolved with competition, fire, browsing animals, varied moisture, and undisturbed soils. Suburban and urban landscapes are not that. Compacted soil from construction, limited rooting space next to driveways, irrigation meant for turf grass, heat-reflective hardscapes, and pruning around buildings are all unnatural pressures.

Good service for trees adjusts for these constraints. Mulch, applied in a broad, shallow ring two to three inches deep, keeps soil moisture stable and supports soil biology. Proper irrigation targets the critical root zone, not the trunk. Strategic pruning reduces conflict with structures and promotes strong branch unions. A reputable professional tree service will also tailor care to species and site. For instance, oaks often resent summer pruning in regions where oak wilt exists, while many fruit trees respond well to late winter training. Trees do a lot on their own, but a thoughtful tree care service gives them the conditions to do it well in a built environment.

Myth 4: Seal pruning cuts with paint or tar

Wound dressing products are a holdover from mid-20th-century thinking. The science has moved on. Trees don’t “heal” like animals; they compartmentalize damage. Cells around the wound form chemical and physical barriers to slow decay and infection. Paints and tars can trap moisture, create microhabitats for fungi, and slow the natural closure process.

What helps is a clean cut at the branch collar, the slightly swollen ring where a branch meets the trunk or parent limb. Cutting just outside this collar preserves the tree’s natural defenses. Sharp tools matter, as does timing. Many species tolerate pruning well in late winter when disease pressure is low, while others benefit from midsummer cuts that slow regrowth. A competent tree care service crew will know local disease cycles and species quirks, and they will seldom reach for wound paint unless a specific state forestry guideline calls for it on oak wilt or similar pathogens.

Myth 5: All “tree guys” are the same

The gap between a trained arborist and an unqualified cutter can be the difference between a safe, healthy tree and a slow-motion failure. Certification does not guarantee perfection, but it correlates strongly with safe practices and sound biology. Look for ISA Certified Arborists or comparable credentials and verify them. Liability insurance and workers’ compensation coverage protect you if something goes wrong, because even careful crews face unpredictable factors such as hidden rot or sudden wind gusts.

Experience with local species counts. A local tree service that regularly works with your region’s pines, oaks, elms, or ornamentals will recognize common pests and structural patterns. If a bid seems suspiciously low, ask what is omitted. I have seen quotes that skipped cleanup, stump grinding, or traffic control, only to

surprise the homeowner after the fact. A professional tree service quotes the entire scope, including haul-away, permits when required, and protection for nearby hardscapes.

Myth 6: Pruning should wait until branches touch the house

By the time a limb grazes the siding or roof, you have a recurring maintenance issue and an invitation for pests. Branches swaying against shingles shorten roof life. Squirrels and raccoons also use overhead highways to reach attic vents.

Preventive structural pruning in the first five to ten years after planting sets a tree's long-term architecture. We select a central leader where appropriate, favor evenly spaced scaffold branches, and reduce or remove limbs angling toward structures. Think of it like orthodontics: light, early interventions beat major corrections later. For mature trees, targeted clearance pruning that maintains lateral support and branch balance prevents the yo-yo cycle of heavy regrowth right back toward the roof.

Myth 7: The biggest risk in storms is the tallest tree

Height attracts attention, but root health and branch structure drive most failures. I have seen modest ornamental pears split in half under 35 mile-per-hour winds because of included bark at branch unions, while a taller oak stood firm. Shallow, compacted soil after a patio project often matters more than canopy height.

For properties with complex exposure, a commercial tree service will sometimes model wind throw risk across multiple trees and structures. For homeowners, the practical version is simpler: check for signs of root plate heaving, fungal conks at the base, recent soil grade changes, and co-dominant stems without established cabling. An arborist can recommend pruning to reduce leverage on suspect limbs, install dynamic or static cabling where appropriate, and in some cases advise removal when the risk can't be mitigated. Being the tallest is not the problem; being structurally compromised is.

Myth 8: "It's dead, so cut it flush to the ground"

Stumps left after removal often resprout, especially from species like poplar, willow, and locust. Cutting flush without grinding leaves roots ready to push up a thicket. When resprouting is not wanted, stump grinding to an adequate depth, usually 6 to 12 inches depending on species and site use, is the clean solution. For future planting, more depth may be needed to avoid nutrient-poor sawdust pockets where new roots will struggle.

When the stump sits near utilities or a hardscape, we map and mark lines before grinding. An experienced tree services team will also discuss backfill options, since grindings alone break down and settle. Mixing in mineral soil and compacting lightly prevents the low spots I see under many former stumps.

Myth 9: Fertilizer is a cure-all

Fertilizer helps when trees are nutrient deficient. Many urban trees, however, suffer more from poor soil structure than lack of nitrogen or potassium. Compact, low-oxygen soils choke roots and soil microbes. Dumping high-nitrogen fertilizer on a stressed tree can force leafy growth that the root system cannot support, and the tree becomes more vulnerable to drought and pests.

Thoughtful service tree care starts with a soil test. If phosphorus is already sufficient, we avoid adding more, especially near waterways. We often use a slow-release, balanced product at modest rates or opt for compost topdressing and mulch to improve organic matter. In tight soils, vertical mulching or air spade decompaction makes a bigger difference than nutrients alone. The goal is to create a living soil where roots can breathe and feed, not to chase green foliage with quick fixes.

Myth 10: Plant it deep so it won’t fall

Planting depth determines long-term root health. The root flare should be visible at the soil surface, not buried. When the flare sits below grade, bark remains wet and weak, inviting decay. Roots respond to burial by circling the trunk, eventually strangling it. I have excavated more than a few “mystery declines” to find a flare six inches too deep and roots wrapped like a belt around the stem.

Ask your tree service company to reveal the flare before planting bare-root, balled-and-burlapped, or container stock. Remove synthetic burlap and wire basket material at least at the upper third of the root ball, often more, while the tree is stabilized. If a container tree has circling roots, we slice and spread them or, in severe cases, box-cut the root mass to stimulate outward growth. Staking is used only as needed and removed within a year. Every step aims for a stable anchor and normal flare exposure.

Myth 11: All pruning should happen in winter

Dormant season pruning is a workhorse, but it is not universally best. Spring bloomers, like many ornamental cherries and serviceberries, hold next year’s flower buds on current wood. Pruning them in late winter removes the show you planted them for. Some trees bleed sap heavily in late winter, such as maples and birches. While bleeding is not usually harmful, it alarms owners and attracts insects in warm snaps.

Summer pruning has its place. If you need to slow a tree’s vigor or target specific crossing branches when foliage makes structure easier to read, mid to late summer cuts can be ideal. Disease timing matters too. Where oak wilt is a risk, we avoid pruning oaks during high-vector months and schedule work for winter or the cold shoulder seasons. A nuanced tree care service plan considers both biology and your goals, rather than treating the calendar as a strict rule.

Myth 12: A chainsaw and a ladder are all you need

I understand the DIY impulse. I also have a mental ledger of ER trips avoided by following basic safe work practices. Working aloft with a spinning chain near your face while branches rebound is unforgiving. Improper cuts can barber chair a trunk or set a limb swinging into a window. Electrical hazards are not always obvious; even service drops to a house can cause fatal arcs through wood and tools.

Professional crews use ropes, friction devices, rigging blocks, helmet and eye protection, and saw lanyards. We analyze the path of each piece we cut and sometimes lower branches in multiple steps to control momentum. On removals near structures, we plan a tie-in, redirect loads, pad edges, and spot for utilities. Hiring a professional tree service for anything beyond ground-level light pruning is not a luxury, it’s a safety decision.

Myth 13: New trees don’t need watering if it rains

A brief shower might wet the top half-inch of soil. New roots sit deeper and require consistent moisture for the first one to two years. Overwatering is a risk too, especially in heavy soils. The right practice is simple:

check the soil with your hand or a probe. If the top two to three inches are dry, water slowly at the dripline until the top eight to ten inches are moist.

In my own neighborhood, I tracked a summer where ornamental maples watered weekly survived a heat wave with minimal scorch, while those left to intermittent storms lost 30 to 50 percent of their canopy. A steady, moderate schedule beats occasional soaking or neglect. Many local tree service teams provide watering guidance or short-term irrigation setups, especially for commercial tree service accounts where dozens of new plantings must establish evenly.

Myth 14: If the bark is damaged, the tree is done

Bark injuries happen, from mower strikes to storm scrapes. Trees are remarkably capable of compartmentalizing localized damage. The key is extent and location. A small wound on one side often closes over a few seasons. Extensive girdling around the trunk, particularly near the base, is far more serious.

What helps is tidying the wound without enlarging it. We remove only ragged bark that prevents proper closure, keeping cuts smooth and following natural lines. We avoid wrapping with non-breathable materials. Monitoring over time matters, because the tree will create woundwood that swells around the injury. If the tree is valued and the damage significant, an arborist can evaluate whether bridging grafts or other advanced techniques make sense. Not every bark wound is a death sentence, but it demands attention.

Myth 15: You can’t do anything about roots lifting sidewalks

Tree roots follow oxygen and moisture. Sidewalks over compacted soil provide both at the edges and through cracks, inviting roots to explore. While some cases require panel replacement, many can be managed. Options include root pruning paired with sidewalk ramping, flexible paving products in select zones, and soil cells or structural soil during new construction that allow root growth beneath the walk without heaving.

Root pruning should be cautious and planned. Cutting roots too close to the trunk can destabilize a tree. An arborist evaluates species tolerance, trunk diameter, and the distance from the cut to the trunk before proceeding. In cities, commercial tree services often coordinate with public works to implement root-friendly designs. For homeowners, early communication with a local tree service prevents a small lift from becoming a lawsuit trip hazard.

Myth 16: All removals should be done as soon as you see fungus

Fungal conks signal decay, but not all decay means imminent failure. The species of fungus, size and location of conks, and the tree’s structural role all matter. Some heart rot fungi can be present for years with limited structural effect in large-diameter trunks, while sap rot near a critical branch union could be urgent. We balance the biology with target risk. A tree over a busy driveway gets a different threshold than one at the back of a pasture.

Where the risk is intermediate, we sometimes reduce a tree’s sail area, install support systems, and monitor annually. Where the decay is advanced or the target value is high, removal is the responsible choice. Emergency tree service comes into play after storms, but smart assessment ahead of time reduces the likelihood you will need it.

Myth 17: Cheaper is better for commodity services

Tree work looks like a commodity from the curb: a chipper, a few saws, a crew, in and out. What you cannot see is the planning, training, equipment maintenance, and insurance behind the scenes. Low bids often omit rigging that protects your roof and landscape, or they rely on precarious ladder work instead of safe climbing or an aerial lift. They may leave brush, grind stumps poorly, or skip permits.

Ask for details: how will the crew access the tree, protect the lawn, handle debris, and manage traffic if needed? Good tree services will answer plainly. They will provide certificates of insurance and a written scope of work. Many residential tree service clients find that the mid-range bid often reflects true cost and better outcomes. For multi-site contracts, commercial clients often add service-level expectations and safety standards to ensure consistent results.

Myth 18: If it’s green, it’s good

A tree can be vibrantly green and still poorly structured. Fast-growing species in particular can develop narrow crotch angles and included bark early on. If you only track color, you miss the framework that determines how the tree handles storms in ten years. Field crews trained to read branch unions, load paths, and stress risers see this coming.

Structural pruning in youth, and judicious reduction later, is the quiet work that prevents dramatic failures. You will not get compliments from the street the day after this kind of work, because the tree looks much the same. You will, however, keep that tree off the evening news during the next wind event. A quality tree care service makes this an ongoing conversation, not a one-time fix.

Myth 19: Removing interior branches makes trees “breathe”

Interior thinning used to be fashionable. Crews would strip inner growth to “let air through.” The result is a lion-tailed canopy, foliage heavy at the tips with bare inner branches. This shifts mass outward, increases leverage on limbs, and paradoxically raises failure risk. Trees do not breathe like animals, and the canopy is not a sail that needs holes punched in it. What helps is selective thinning that preserves inner foliage, which supports branch health and reduces end-weight.

We keep live interior growth where possible and focus on removing crossing, dead, diseased, or defective wood. When we reduce a limb, we bring the cut back to a robust lateral branch to maintain energy pathways. The canopy remains layered, with leaves distributed along branches, which is the structure nature prefers.

Myth 20: Emergency tree service is a last-ditch luxury

The word “emergency” sounds expensive, and it can be when heavy equipment and overtime are involved. But timely action after a storm often reduces overall damage and cost. A hung limb over a driveway or a cracked co-dominant stem can shift with the next breeze. Waiting until normal business hours might be reasonable in some cases, reckless in others.

What we do in emergencies is stabilize. That might mean installing a temporary brace, carefully unloading a trapped limb, or sectioning a tree away from a structure without sending it through a window. We document conditions for insurance, secure the site, and in many cases schedule the remainder of the work during regular hours. The myth is that you must choose between panic and indifference. A well-run local tree service will give you clear triage options and price them accordingly.

How to choose the right partner for services for trees

Good outcomes start with good partnerships. Homeowners and facility managers do not need to become botanists. They need an arborist who listens, explains options with trade-offs, and stands behind the work. Use short, targeted checks to separate marketing from mastery:

- Ask about credentials, insurance, and recent projects with your species and property type.
- Request a written scope that includes cleanup, disposal, stump handling, and surface protection.
- Have them explain how they will access and rig the work, especially near structures or wires.
- Compare not just price but timing, equipment, and aftercare recommendations.
- Clarify communication during weather delays or emergencies, including who decides on-site changes.

These five questions reveal how a tree service company thinks under pressure and whether they treat your property as a system, not a one-off job.

A brief case file from the field

A client called about a leaning ash after a windstorm. From the driveway, it looked like a removal waiting to happen. The canopy was full, foliage rich, and the lean seemed fresh. On inspection, the lean was old, and the root plate was undisturbed. The real issue sat fifteen feet up: a co-dominant union with included bark, a classic shear plane in waiting. The fix was not a chainsaw to the trunk. We performed a crown reduction on the affected leader to shift load and installed a noninvasive dynamic cabling system two-thirds of the way up the canopy to limit separation. We pruned out deadwood and corrected a few crossing limbs. That tree rode out two more storm seasons without incident.

In another case, a commercial client wanted to top a row of lindens to keep signage visible. We proposed selective windowing, shaping gaps through the canopy aligned with sightlines rather than flattening the trees. Growth remained vigorous, structure intact, and signage visible. The upfront cost was slightly higher than topping, but maintenance intervals lengthened and liability warnings from their insurer ceased.

The quiet value of continuity

Trees reward patience and consistency. A one-time visit fixes urgent problems, but the best tree care accumulates benefits over years. Soil improves under mulch. Root systems expand into decompacted zones. Canopies mature into balanced architecture. Pests are caught early, and species-specific routines become second nature. Residential tree service clients often set annual or semiannual checkups timed to seasonal needs. Commercial properties schedule rotating zones to spread cost and maintain a consistent appearance.

That continuity does not lock you into inflexible plans. Weather, construction, and budget shift. A responsive arborist service adjusts, provides options at different price points, and keeps records so decisions build on history rather than guesswork.

Final thought: myths fade when results speak

Most myths persist because they offer a shortcut or a story that feels right. Trees are patient, but physics and biology are unforgiving. If you want shade that outlasts generations, wildlife that returns each season, and property protected from preventable failures, choose methods that have stood up to time and storms. A professional tree service does not sell fear or magic. It offers judgment, craft, and accountability.

Whether you manage a campus with dozens of species or a single cherished oak over your patio, find a local tree service that treats tree care as a living practice. Ask better questions, ignore easy myths, and invest in the kind of work you will not have to redo. When the wind picks up and your trees simply move as they should, you will know you chose well.