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# Watch out before your tree turns into a zombie

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by **Julia Bayly**

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A licensed arborist prepares to remove a portion of a tree that has split into two top branches growing from a single trunk. This creates an area of weakness in a tree and the branches could fall, causing injury or property damage. Credit: Courtesy of Andrew Marquis

No one wants zombies in their backyard. And while the human forms of walking dead are straight out of Hollywood, there are very real zombies lurking on the Maine landscape, and they pose very real threats to homeowners — the zombie trees.

**Zombie trees** are those that are technically alive, but have lost so much of their internal woody material that the ability to support themselves is compromised. All it would take is enough time or a gust of wind to blow them over. Zombie trees or any other weakened trees put lives and property at risk.

A healthy stand of trees, or even a single tree, adds a lot to a property. Trees can provide shade, a bit of privacy, a gathering place for birds and smaller wildlife and an aesthetic value to the land.

But trees can present hazards to people and property ranging from the mildly annoying to being fatal. For that reason, anyone with trees — and even shrubs — should take time to assess their condition and proximity to anything of value.

That's because trees or branches can pose serious problems. Over the past several years, people in Maine have been severely injured or killed by falling trees and branches. Most recently, a 9-year-old girl was killed when a thunderstorm hit a campground in the Sebego area and the high winds pushed over a tree onto her family's car in which she had been sitting in July.

While it's not necessary to cut down every tree — zombie or not — to ensure safety, those who work closely with trees recommend regularly inspecting them for damage or other signs that they could be dangerous.

"People do get concerned about their trees," said Andrew Marquis of Marquis Tree Works in St. Agatha. "It's good for them to look around and check things out."

Among the things that indicate a tree could be in danger of falling are any changes to its roots or the ground around it.

"Look at the root plank," he said. "Are there any cracks?"

The root plank are those roots that hold a tree to the ground and provide stability. Damage to the root plank may mean the tree can't hold itself up and could easily topple over.

"Check the ground around the base of the trunk," Marquis said. "If there are cracks it could mean the whole tree has shifted under the ground and it could be unstable."

Marquis also advises examining the trunks of trees for any cracks or damage. And to look for trees where the tops have split to create a Y with two branches — known as co-dominant stems — to grow. The bark between these branches grows in such a manner it is actually pushing the branches away from each other.

“Twenty years of a tree growing like that, and you can have a weak point,” Marquis said. “That is an important issue to look at.”

Just because a tree looks healthy does not mean all is well. Remember those zombies?

Zombie trees can fool people into believing they are just fine, especially when there are no obvious injuries or damaging events. But they are dead and weakened inside, making them vulnerable to wind and storm events.

It takes outside stress to turn a tree into a zombie. These stressors include drought conditions like the ones in Maine this past summer, insect infestations, chemicals, road salt and soil compaction.

It can take a trained eye to spot a zombie tree. That’s why Marquis recommends calling in a licensed arborist to inspect your trees. They can not only assess any potential problems, but recommend a course of action to mitigate the situation.

Sometimes just trimming some branches and limbs is enough to eliminate any risk and the zombie tree can remain standing. Marquis stressed it is important to call in professionals to do the job safely and properly.

“Call a licensed arborist,” Marquis said. “A lot of people can run a chainsaw, but a licensed arborist is trained and certified to do things safely.”

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