

Live-Tree Applications

Redirecting harmful client requests in the field



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Today we use it on live trees

PERMISSION →

WHY →

MOST →

SHOW →

WRITE

Thursday's framework in five words

1

I read you the ask

A request a client has made of me, or of someone like you.

2

One of you answers as the arborist

Start with a question, not an answer.

3

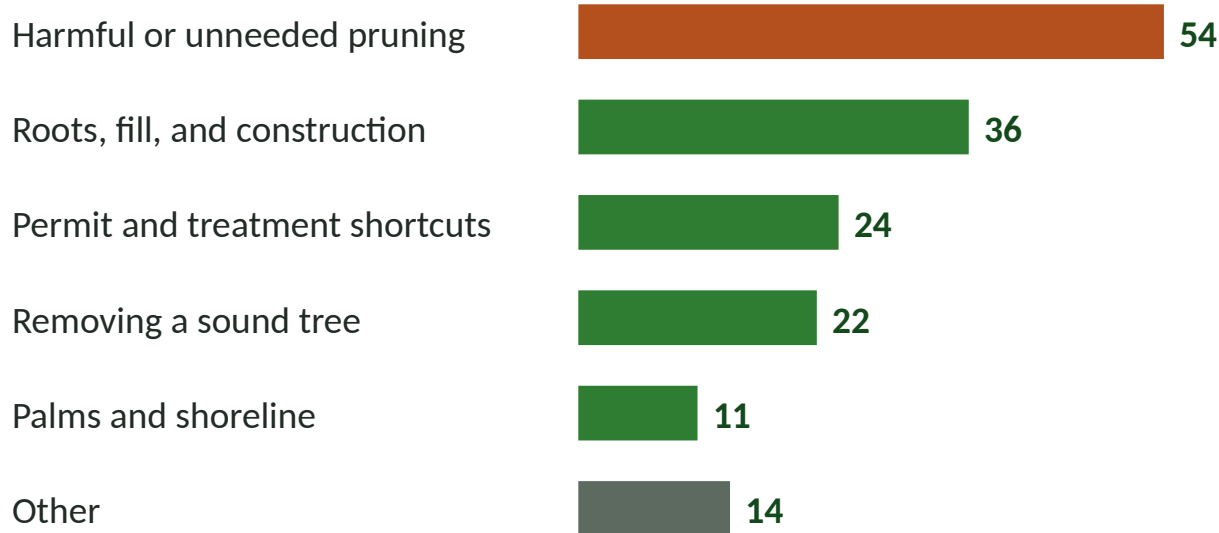
I show how I would handle it

What I would say, show, offer, and write down.

Nobody cuts anything today. This is a preserve.



What people ask me for



Who asked: homeowners 69, builders 36, boards and managers 24, others 31, a neighbor 1.



My count, April to October 2026. Close, not exact.

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How I answered

83

I redirected: a different cut or a different method. The client took it in about 57.

30

A plain no. 20 were mine; the rest came from my staff, crews, or peers.

24

Yes. In most, the reason held up or I set limits.

The other 24: I arrived after the damage was done (9), or there was nothing to classify (15).

I redirect far more often than I refuse.



The redirect in five moves

1

Ask why

“Why do you want to do that?”

2

Tie it to what they want most

A safe tree, or no leaves in the gutter? They have to pick.

3

Show it on the tree

Point, measure, hold the pole. People don't retain a lecture.

4

Offer the smaller cut or a different method

The tips, not the limb. Air and hand tools, not the machine.

5

Write the limit down

Cut size, clearance, and what the work will not do.



The fishing pole



16 oz at 100 in. = 1,600 ounce-inches at the hand

16



12 oz at 80 in. = 960 ounce-inches

12

25%

less weight on the end

About 40%

less turning
force at the
hand

So where should pruning be done? In the ends of the branches.



My arithmetic, counting the weights only. The pole's own weight changes the exact figure.

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The weigh-in



1. Mark the cuts



2. Weigh what comes off



3. Measure the largest cut

421 lb

came off the end of
one limb

Under 3 in.

was the largest cut

38%

less strain on a live oak
stem after about 20%
of its mass came off



Photos and weights: my Physics and Trees class. Strain: Gilman, Miesbauer, Masters 2015.

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Stop 1: the long low limb

THE CLIENT SAYS

“Take that whole limb off.”
“It’s going to come down on the road.”



WHAT IS UNDER IT

- A long limb reads as a weak limb.
- They need clearance for a truck, a mower, or a view.

ASK FIRST

“Are you trying to raise it a little, or pull it back?”



Stop 1: shorten it, don't remove it

SHOW

Hold the pole. Pace the limb. Find the lateral that already grows up.

OFFER

Two or three small reduction cuts at the end. Lift it at the tips.

WRITE

No live cut over 3 inches. Clearance as a number: 14 feet over a road.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

In one study of small live oak branches, cuts larger than about 0.39 of the trunk's diameter led to severe trunk discoloration. UF/IFAS cut size guide: 1 to 3 inches on decay-prone trees, up to 6 inches or more on trees that resist decay.

Eisner, Gilman, Grabosky 2002; Gilman and Bisson 2007. The 3 inch cap and 14 feet are my company's numbers.

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Stop 2: the inside of the crown

THE CLIENT SAYS

- “Thin it out so the wind blows through.”
- “Clean out all those suckers.”
- “Give it a hurricane cut.”

WHAT IS UNDER IT

- The belief that an open crown is storm proof.
- A big brush pile feels like value for money.

ASK FIRST

“Why do you want to do that?” “Which limb worries you?”



Stop 2: leave the inside alone

SHOW

A bag at arm's length, then bring it in. The inside branches are the cushion.

OFFER

Clean the dead wood. Shorten the few overextended limbs. Leave the sprouts.

WRITE

Water sprouts stay. Live foliage removed: under 10 percent on a mature tree.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Young planted live oaks, about 20 feet tall, in 110 mph wind with a third of the foliage removed: thinning or reducing the crown cut upper trunk movement. Raising did not, and lion's tailing appeared ineffective.



Gilman, Masters, Grabosky 2008. In red maples, lion tailing took 19% of tree weight without changing the center of wind pressure (Smiley and Kane 2006).

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Stop 3: the line

THE CLIENT SAYS

“Cut it all back to the roofline.”

“Top it. It’s too tall.”

“Round it over like last time.”



WHAT IS UNDER IT

- An insurer’s letter, leaves in the gutter, or fear of height.
- The last crew did it, so it must be normal.

ASK FIRST

“What do you want most: a safe tree, or no leaves on the roof?”



Stop 3: a distance, not a line

SHOW

The cut ends. Where would the sprouts come from, and what holds them on?

OFFER

Reduce to laterals at least one third the diameter of what comes off. Under wires, cut to laterals growing away from the line.

WRITE

6 to 8 feet over the roof. 2 to 4 feet off the walls. Leaves will still fall.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Topping can remove 50 to 100% of the leaf-bearing crown, and shoots can grow as much as 20 feet in a year in some species. Under utility lines, round-over regrowth exceeded natural, lateral pruning (six northern species, 1987).



ISA, Why Topping Hurts Trees; Goodfellow et al. 1987. Clearances are from my own specs.

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Stop 4: the roots

THE CLIENT SAYS

“Grind those roots. They’re lifting the driveway.”
“We’ll trench right through here.”
“Just throw dirt over it.”

WHAT IS UNDER IT

- The easiest route with the least that can go wrong, for them.
- Nobody can see roots, so nobody counts them.

ASK FIRST

“What does the equipment need?” “Can the grade or the line move?”



Stop 4: find the roots before you cut

SHOW

Pace 3 and 5 trunk diameters out from the trunk and flag them.

OFFER

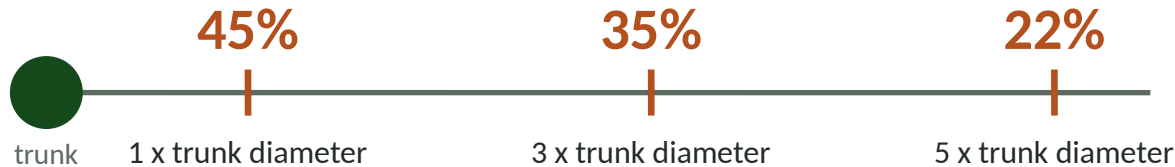
Expose with air or hand tools. Bore under, bridge, or reroute. Cut only what is needed.

WRITE

Inside 5 trunk diameters, expose first and cut only what is needed. No fill over the root zone.

STABILITY LOST, ONE-SIDED TRENCH

3x was not reliably better than 1x.



Miesbauer, Koeser, Kane 2025 (red maple). Live oak roots regrew to 22% of their cross-section in five years (Koeser et al. 2025).

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Stop 5: the whole tree

THE CLIENT SAYS

“Take it down before it falls on the house.”
“Somebody told me it’s dying.”



WHAT IS UNDER IT

- Fear, often from something they were told.
- One scary word: crack, hollow, diseased, dead.

ASK FIRST

“Did something happen, or did someone tell you it wasn’t safe?”



Stop 5: is it risky, or just large?

SHOW

The union, and the bulge on either side. Then the accurate word. If it is a seam, say seam.

OFFER

A written risk rating. Then the options: reduce, cable, brace, monitor.

WRITE

What I found, what it means, and what risk is left after the work.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

After Hurricane Ivan, 91% of live oaks were still standing, 77% of laurel oaks, and 72% of water oaks. Wind-related tree failures killed about 31 people a year in the US from 1995 to 2007.



Duryea, Kampf, Littell 2007 (Florida Panhandle neighborhoods); Schmidlin 2009; Klein et al. 2019.

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Stop 6: palms and young trees

THE CLIENT SAYS

“Hurricane cut the palms.”

“Top that young tree before it gets big.”

WHAT IS UNDER IT

- The belief that fewer fronds means less for the wind to grab.
- Wanting to keep a tree small forever.

ASK FIRST

“What is the goal for this tree?”



Stop 6: nothing above 9 and 3

SHOW

Look up through a low frond. Yellow and see-through means the palm is still feeding on it.

OFFER

Dead fronds and seed stalks only. On a young tree, structure it now so nobody ever asks to top it.

WRITE

No fronds removed above horizontal. If it's alive and a little yellow, it stays.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

After the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons, hurricane-cut palms were more likely to have their crowns snap off than palms with fuller crowns. Sabal palm: 80% standing after Ivan (Florida Panhandle).



Broschat, UF/IFAS ENH1182 (a field observation); Duryea and Kampf 2007.

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Not just homeowners



Builders and trades (42 of 161)

Ask what the equipment needs. Be there when it arrives.



Boards and managers (24)

Turn “trim” into measured clearances and split line items.



Insurer demands (4)

Most arrive through a board or an owner. Answer with measurements.



Other arborists (9)

Disagree with the finding, not the person.

Almost every contractor leans toward whatever is easiest with the least that can go wrong.



At the line and at the curb

UTILITY

“Round it over like last time.”

Cut to laterals growing away from the line. Regrowth is slower.

“You’re not touching my tree.”

Find the grievance. Explain the easement and the safety reason. Offer what can flex.

MUNICIPAL

“Remove that street tree. It’s messy.”

Inspect it. Explain the written policy. Offer pruning.

“The sidewalk crew wants it out.”

Ramp it, grind the slab edge, meander, narrow, or bridge first.

Built from published guidance, not my own jobs. Tell me where it is wrong.



Goodfellow et al. 1987; Dahle et al. 2006; Pizza 1984; Tree City USA Bulletin 3; Grand Forks Park District 2021.

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When I say no, and when I say yes

NO, WITH A REASON

“It’s your property; you can do what you want. I also can choose not to do that.”

“I signed a code of ethics. What good are the credentials if I don’t uphold it?”

“If you want that, you’ll need someone else.”

YES, WHEN

- The reason holds up: documented damage, a building footprint.
- The limits are written down.
- They have all the information, and it is still their call, to a point.

I find a way to say no without saying no. Then I tell them why.



When the client asks the crew

1

Stop and call the person who sold it

The one who had the conversation answers scope questions.

2

Settle objections during the estimate

Not once the crew is there.

3

Write the words the crew should act on

Water sprouts, not suckers. The crew cuts what the words say.

4

Invite the client to the pruning visit

Pruning is subjective. Let them watch it go.

“Because the crew isn’t the ones that had that conversation.”



When the harmful thing gets done

Chips over the roots

Four to five feet of wood chips
dumped over live oak roots.
Several of the oaks died.

Years of hard cut-backs

Stems decayed behind the old
cuts. A large section failed toward
the neighbor.

Lion's tailed just before I came

Nothing left to prune. All I could
offer was cables.

Told her trees were dead

She paid \$7,000. The cutting drew
a \$10,000 city violation.

We can't glue branches back on.



Numbers worth writing down

	The number	Whose
Reduction cut	Back to a lateral at least 1/3 the diameter of what comes off	ISA
Cut size	1 to 3 in. on decay-prone trees; up to 6 in. or more on trees that resist decay	UF/IFAS
My live cut cap	3 in.	My company
Mature tree dose	Under 10% of live foliage unless there is a good reason	UF/IFAS
Root cuts	5 trunk diameters or more from the trunk; farther on a mature tree	UF/IFAS
Palms	Nothing above 9 and 3	UF/IFAS
Mulch	2 to 4 in. deep, kept off the trunk	ISA



None of these is a safe harbor. Species, age, health, and site change the answer.

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THANK YOU

Try one redirect on your next job

BEFORE YOU ANSWER THE NEXT HARMFUL REQUEST, ASK

“Why do you want to do that?”

Questions?

Apollo O’Neil

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OneilsTreeService.com

Have a request I did not cover? Tell me now and we will walk to a tree.



**Slides, field card and
sources**

apollooneil.com/resources



Where the numbers come from

Pruning and wind

Gilman, Masters, Grabosky 2008. Pruning affects tree movement in hurricane force wind. *Arboric. Urban For.* 34(1).

Smiley and Kane 2006. The effects of pruning type on wind loading of *Acer rubrum*. *Arboric. Urban For.* 32(1).

Gilman, Miesbauer, Masters 2015. Structural pruning effects on stem and trunk strain in wind. *Arboric. Urban For.* 41(1).

Eisner, Gilman, Grabosky 2002. Branch morphology impacts compartmentalization of pruning wounds. *J. Arboric.* 28(2).

Gilman and Bisson 2007. Developing a preventive pruning program. *UF/IFAS ENH 1062, 1063.*

ISA 2021. Why Topping Hurts Trees. Proper Mulching Techniques.

Duryea, Kampf, Littell 2007. Hurricanes and the urban forest: I. *Arboric. Urban For.* 33(2). Duryea and Kampf 2007, *UF/IFAS FR173, FR174.*

Palms

Broschat 2011. Pruning Palms. *UF/IFAS ENH1182.*

Roots

Miesbauer, Koeser, Kane 2025. Impact of trenching on root loss and tree stability. *Arboric. Urban For.* 51(1).

Koeser, Grabosky, Benson, Morgenroth 2025. *Quercus virginiana* root regrowth following linear trenching. *Arboric. Urban For.* 51(1).

City of Orange Beach Zoning Ordinance, Article 16.

Utility and municipal

Goodfellow, Blumreich, Nowacki 1987. *J. Arboric.* 13(8). Browning and Wiant 1997. *J. Arboric.* 23(3). Dahle et al. 2006. *Arboric. Urban For.* 32(4).

Pizza 1984. What can be done about trim refusals. *J. Arboric.* 10(7).

Arbor Day Foundation, Tree City USA Bulletin 3. Grand Forks Park District tree removal policy, 2021.

Risk

Schmidlin 2009. *Natural Hazards* 50. Klein et al. 2019. *Arboric. Urban For.* 45(1). ISA Basic Tree Risk Assessment Form.

My own material

161 requests from my company's visits and calls, April to October 2026. Photos and weights from my Physics and Trees class.

