

Don't Use Climbing Spikes When Pruning Trees

Is your tree care provider using spikes to climb while pruning your trees? Ouch!

Climbing spikes are sharpened steel spikes attached to the climber's leg by leather straps and padded supports. A tree worker should only use them to access trees being removed. When these spikes are used on living trees, it is traumatizing to the tree and creates unnecessary damage.

Each puncture from a climbing spike produces a certain amount of tree tissue death, though this varies from tree to tree. In most cases, isolated wounds will seal, but over time, groupings of spike holes can cause the entire area on the trunk to die back with no chance of recovery. This happens when a tree is repeatedly climbed for pruning while using spikes. The likelihood of piercing the cambium (living tissue beneath the bark) is high, even with larger trees and thick bark. If soon after the work is performed with spikes there is sap oozing from the wounds, the tree is responding to spike damage. Repeated damage of this type is harmful to the tree.

So why would climbers use spikes if they are harmful to the tree? There are a few exceptional situations where using spikes is appropriate, such as:

- when the tree is being removed.
- when branches are more than throwline distance apart and there is no other means of climbing the tree (for example: when there are no branches lower than 50 feet), with no access for an aerial lift device or crane.
- if the tree is too close to power lines and cannot be accessed safely by other means.
- to reach an injured climber.

Professional tree care companies are aware of the dangers of spikes and use proper tree equipment such as ropes and climbing harnesses to climb (or aerial lift devices or cranes, if accessible). This, coupled with their training and experience, contributes to the future health of the tree.

Homeowners searching for qualified tree care companies should look for the following:

- Good References: Ask for references, and check on the quality of their work. Don't be rushed by a bargain and don't pay in advance.
- Proof of Insurance: Ask for current certificates of liability and workers' compensation insurance, if applicable. Be aware that if the tree care company you hire doesn't have insurance or is not a legal company, you could be held responsible as a contractor.
- Solid Reputation: Verify professional affiliations the company might have, such as memberships in business and/or professional organizations such as the Tree Care Industry Association.
- Up-to-Date Knowledge: Ask if they follow ANSI Standards. A professional arborist will be aware of the current safety, pruning, fertilizing and cabling standards.
- Contract: Insist on a signed contract as to cost, dates when work is to be performed, and exactly what is to be done. Insist that climbing spikes are used only if the tree is to be cut down.

Find a Professional

A professional arborist can assess your landscape and work with you to determine the best trees and shrubs to plant for your existing landscape. Contact the Tree Care Industry Association, a public and professional resource on trees and arboriculture since 1938. Celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, TCIA has more than 2,300 member tree care firms and affiliated companies who recognize stringent safety and performance standards and who are required to carry liability insurance. TCIA also has the nation's only Accreditation program that helps consumers find tree care companies that have been inspected and accredited based on: adherence to industry standards for quality and safety; maintenance of trained, professional staff; and dedication to ethics and quality in business practices. For more, visit www.tcia.org or www.treecaretips.org.

*Board Certified Master Arborist, Certified Treecare Safety Professional