How to Find a Good Arborist

Good professional arborists restore mature trees by thinning, not topping, them (above). Cleanup is part of the job.

Restoring or removing a large tree can be dangerous, and should be attempted only by a professional arborist. Finding a good arborist isn't as easy as turning to the telephone directory, though. A fairly large portion of those in the business of "pruning" trees actually harm trees in their efforts to please the customer or make money. Look for these traits before hiring an arborist:

1. LICENSE. Look for a professional who is licensed, bonded and insured.

2. EDUCATION. Some have degrees in horticulture, forestry or plant pathology.

3. PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATION. Many are members of the International Society of Arboriculture or the National Arborists Association, and have access to information on good pruning techniques. ISA members subscribe to a code of ethics. Neither organization, however, guarantees good work.
4. ACCREDITATION. Some have passed both written and practical tests, and will proudly tell you that they are ISA Certified. A "CA," Certified Arborist, and a "CAT," Certified Arboreal Technician, likely will be very knowledgeable about tree pruning.

5. NO TOPPING. Good arborists will not top mature trees, and if you ask them to, they will try to talk you out of it. "Should I top my tree?" is a good "trick" question to ask a prospective pruner.

6. NO SPURS. They do not climb with spurs (also called gaffs or hooks) – the spikes on boots that telephone pole climbers wear. Spur climbing causes serious injury to the tree trunks. Instead they use ropes and climb ladders to get into and around trees. They do not need a bucket truck.

When you solicit bids, have companies bid to National Arborist Association pruning standards. That will ensure that you are comparing apples with apples and not tree pruning with tree torture.

To receive more information on these NAA pruning standards, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to the National Arborist Association, Meeting Place Mall, P.O. Box 1094, Amherst, NH 03031-1094; or call (603) 673-3311. Additional information is available from PlantAmnesty, an organization that promotes proper pruning of trees and shrubs. Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to PlantAmnesty, 906 N.W. 87th Seattle, WA 98117. Ask for the order blank or for specific information.