The words no homeowner wants to hear after having tree work in the yard are, “No, ma’am, that was $1,000 per tree, not $1,000 for the whole job.” Or, “Hey, we did what you asked us to do. The tree is pruned but the debris is your responsibility.”

Although much of this bulletin is directed toward communities that use contractors or are starting to move in that direction, there are points throughout that are equally applicable to homeowners. Specifically, here is a checklist to use when making an agreement to have someone work on your trees.

- Use only reputable tree experts, preferably with a local address and a degree of permanency – not just someone who knocks on your door.
- The 4 ‘musts’: ISA arborist certification; proof of liability insurance that covers personal injury and property damage; worker’s compensation; and local references where work has been done. Do not settle for less.
- Get more than one estimate before agreeing to the work.
- For tree health questions or difficult jobs, it pays to hire an independent arboriculture consultant. Expect to pay for the person’s time, because his or her knowledge is the product.
- Carefully review (or prepare) the contract, using points made elsewhere in this bulletin as a guide for making sure you and the contractor are in agreement about scope of work, standards of performance, price and other conditions. Two-way communication is essential before signing.

A Note for Homeowners

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Working with Contracts & Contractors

Contracting in urban forestry has been around as long as there has been a demand, but over the last several decades when John Davey and Francis Bartlett first hung out their shingles to provide commercial tree care in America. Contracting is part of every company, most municipalities and is – or should be – involved anytime a homeowner needs work done on trees by someone outside the family.

In most cases, the agreement between parties goes smoothly and provides mutual satisfaction. But sometimes things go very wrong. In other cases, tax payers’ dollars could be saved through contracting instead of using in-house personnel, but if done without careful analysis, it may be the other way around.

Contracting for arboricultural services is the most common use of ‘outside’ help in urban forestry or home tree care. However, there is also assistance available for the broader management needs of urban forestry. For example, in Michigan, J. H. Hart Urban Forestry offers not only traditional procedures such as fertilizing, pruning, removals and stump grinding, but company personnel also serve as the urban foresters for the cities of Birmingham, Troy, Rochester Hills, Lathrup Village, and Royal Oak, and for the Village of Beverly Hills.

In this bulletin, we take a look at some of the ways contracting is being used and some considerations that can make this a successful part of tree stewardship.