



## Is My Tree Safe?

Every storm poses the question, “Are the trees around my home safe?” or, more often, “How can I tell if my neighbors’ trees are going to fall on my house?” All trees will fail at some point in their life, regardless of shape, size and situation, and all trees have some level of risk associated with them. The likelihood of a tree failing is a function of many factors. These factors are not limited to the size of the storm and height of the tree, but also include the structural integrity and health of the tree’s root system, trunk and crown. Risk, on the other hand, is a function of both the tree’s integrity and the things that might be impacted should a tree, or its parts, fail. For example, a large water oak with a large trunk cavity located in a pasture presents a very different level of risk than the same tree in a city park or your back yard. The first might cause little economic damage should it fail; the other could present a risk to personal property and life.

### How do you know?

Determining the likelihood of tree failure requires a significant level of experience and knowledge about how trees grow, how they fail, and what characteristics make a tree “risky.” We live with risk every day and we assume a certain level of risk wherever we go. Assessing tree risk requires special training and experience and certified arborists are specifically knowledgeable in determining the structural integrity of a tree and the risk it may present. Of course, individual homeowners ultimately determine the level of risk they are willing to accept from their own trees. While there are [self-surveys](#) of landscape trees that homeowners can conduct to determine obvious issues, there is no substitute for a professional assessment of the health of landscape trees. It is also important for homeowners to have a realistic perspective about how much tree risk they are willing to allow on their property.



### What about my neighbors’ trees?

Well, they *are* your neighbors’ trees, and the responsibility to knowledgeably manage those trees rests with your neighbors. Also, and depending upon many different legal issues, branches that hang over the property line may be yours to do with as you wish, as long as any pruning or removals conform with arboricultural standards. Additionally, a tree whose trunk (even a small portion of the trunk) straddles the property line may be a shared tree, a shared responsibility, and therefore present shared costs. The GFC encourages neighbors to discuss tree issues long before tree failure becomes a problem and responsibility for any damage becomes part of the discussion. Should your neighbor be unresponsive to your concerns it is advised that you seek legal advice about your options.

The GFC provides a link to a list of arborists certified by the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA), who conduct fee-based site visits and can help homeowners determine their tree care needs at: <http://www.gatrees.org/CommunityForests/CertifiedArborists.cfm>.