

## Trees vs. Power Lines

By Susan Camp

One of the most difficult gardening decisions to make is whether or not to cut down a tree. Trees are special beings. They live outside in all types of weather; they withstand blistering heat, bone-chilling cold, wind, snow, frost, hurricanes, and tornadoes. They can heave out of the ground and you can push them upright and stake them and they will live. They can contract all sorts of diseases and you can prune away affected limbs and they will survive. Caterpillars can munch all their leaves and they will grow more. Trees are adaptable to almost any kind of damage they sustain. They may not thrive in full beauty and health, but they can survive and live for many years.

There is one type of damage that will slowly wear a tree's health down until you finally say, "It has to go." Yes, you guessed it. When a tree that was planted under or too close to power lines has been pruned so many times that it has lost all semblance of a tree-like shape or it has become diseased and pest-infested from too many open wounds, you just have to swallow hard and make a decision to call an arborist certified to do that kind of tree removal.

Trees and power lines were never meant to inhabit the same spaces. Fallen trees are a major cause of utility line damage and power outage. Always assume that downed power lines are live. Trees that touch live wires conduct electricity, posing a danger to property owners.

While we love our trees, we also love the electricity that lets us power equipment like air conditioners, refrigerators, and big, flat-screen TV's. In order to prevent incidents caused by trees growing into or near power lines, tree-pruning crews assess and cut back offending trees every few years. Various pruning techniques have been developed to minimize damage to affected trees, but the fact is, everybody hates the way trees look after they have been severely cut back. On top of the disfigurement and potential damage done to the trees, large scale pruning is costly, up to \$1.5 billion each year.

What can property owners do to minimize damage to their trees and the power lines? The answer is deceptively simple: don't plant trees near utility lines. If you decide to plant, the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 430-029 "Trees and Shrubs for Overhead Utility Easements" contains information on appropriate trees and shrubs, including mature height and USDA cold hardiness/heat tolerance zones. You can visit the Hampton Roads Agricultural Research and Extension Center (AREC) in Virginia Beach and explore the Utility Line Arboretum, which contains numerous examples of native and exotic small trees and shrubs that are safe to plant in or near utility easements.

What if you purchase a property with trees already growing under or near power lines? The Dominion Virginia Power website <https://www.dom.com> "Tree Trimming" page answers customer questions such as "Who removes debris?" (It depends. Branches and brush are

removed by the maintenance crews. Tree trunks and large limbs are the responsibility of the property owner.) and “Is it safe for me to trim my own trees?” (Probably not. Call 1-866-DOM-HELP with questions related to trimming trees and vegetation near power lines.) The High Voltage Safety Act requires anyone working near utility lines to contact the power company. In Virginia, a distance of 10 feet must be maintained by non-certified workers. Several pages and videos related to safety and suitable trees and shrubs to plant are available on the website. The tree and shrub lists identify Virginia natives.

If you avoid planting trees under power lines or safely remove trees before they cause problems, the power company will thank you and your trees will reward you for giving them the space they need to live long, healthy, minimally pruned lives.

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