

Four Faces of a Tree Decision

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In any tree decision--what to plant, how to prune, when to remove, when to treat – there are four distinct positions from which a decision can be made. It is important that the urban forester helps decision-makers understand the importance of sound scientific recommendations in order to avoid the pitfalls of personal taste, emotional, and politically-driven perspectives which can make or break a program.

The Four Faces

1. Scientific: Arboricultural and Economic

Scientific decisions are based on research, knowledge, and expertise. For example, arboricultural and economic tree selection is based on which trees will survive and grow. (Which trees will create a diverse urban forest? Which tree will fit in the allotted space? Which tree will have the greatest economic impact for the least maintenance cost?) Tree removal is based on structural integrity using established methods to calculate strength loss. Pruning is based on establishing sound structure and health.

Scientific decisions are not based on flower color, fast growth, shape, fall color, historical significance, flower production, balance, aesthetics, etc. The unique characteristic about the scientific decision is that it can be defended with a high level of scientific accuracy.

2. Personal Taste

The personal taste decision is based on just that--personal taste. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. What appears attractive to one person can be unsightly to another. Oftentimes, such decisions are based on one characteristic of the plant that may only last for 2 or 3 weeks. For the balance of the 49 or 50 weeks of the year, the trees are there with all of their flaws.

3. Emotional

The emotional decision is based on a historical relationship with a particular tree or species. Every person has a unique history—a lifetime of events, both good and bad, that have brought that person to this time and place to create that attachment.

For example, many people may select sugar maple, *Acer saccharum* as a favorite tree. However, their preference may not be based on scientific considerations, but rather their memories of collecting sap for maple syrup with a beloved grandparent.

As with personal taste, an emotional argument cannot be argued nor defended, but may be one of the strongest held, and most difficult to dissuade.

4. Political

Political tree decisions come into play most often when publicly held trees are involved. These decisions come in three forms.

- ❖ The first is the decision to give up the right to make the decision without giving up the responsibility for the results. For example: It is common for residents to make an emotional case to preserve an old hazardous tree on a city street. When the political decision is made by the city to keep the tree, the authority to make the decision is given to the residents. Residents, however, are not given the responsibility for their decision, so when the tree fails, the city is still responsible for repairing property damage. When the decision maker and the one responsible are not the same, poor decisions are made.

Giving Up political decisions are often rooted in the pressure caused by other people's personal or emotional positions regarding these publicly held trees.

- ❖ The second is the *Ignorance is Bliss* political decision. For the average decision maker, tree knowledge is uncommon. It takes a lot of work to make an informed decision. The putative decision-maker must find an expert, learn what needs to be done, and relay that information to others. Unfortunately, it is just easier to make an uninformed decision and plead ignorance later. (Most tree decisions will not become a problem for 3 to 5 years, anyway.) "That's the way we always do it" falls into this category as well. If planting procedures were done correctly when they were first learned, then they will probably be done right on later occasions. If they were done incorrectly the first time, they will probably be done incorrectly thereafter. Too many subsequent decisions had been subject to chance!
- ❖ Complication the first two types of decisions is the third common form of political decisions, the *Ego Driven* political decision. In government, status and power are obtained by making decisions. Often decisions are made to exercise control or power with little science to back up the decision.

All political decisions have one thing in common. In the long-run, they are typically very expensive – costing the community money and time – and are devastating to an urban forestry program. (Scientific knowledge cannot be trumped by idle notions and uninformed speculation.)

Conclusion

In the public arena, politics, emotion, and personal taste must be pushed back in favor of sound scientific decisions. Today's poor decisions result in a legacy of an unsustainable urban forest. Communities that have developed a scientifically sound management plan are able to maintain healthy, safe, cost-effective urban forests.