

Plant Health Care and Trees

"Plant health care, also called PHC, offers a total health approach to landscape and plant health," says Tchukki Andersen, staff arborist with the Tree Care Industry Association. "Your arborist has recognized a potential or actual problem in your landscape that might be best avoided or treated by implementing a PHC treatment program."

Traditional landscape pest control programs rely on what are called "cover sprays." The pest-control sprays offered to the client are based on the company's knowledge of common pest problems and control measures in the service area. The cover-spray type, method and timing are pre-determined by the company. The homeowner may have the option to choose from a number of pest-control programs. Traditional pest control programs are not necessarily obsolete or "bad" for the environment and may be the best option for clients who have overriding concerns about program cost or are only concerned about one specific pest problem.

In contrast, plant health care technicians consider the landscape as a whole when deciding how to best care for plants. PHC technicians control plant problems through careful monitoring of the landscape environment. Chemical controls may be part of the treatment, but they are not necessarily used in every treatment. Because of this, every PHC program is "customized" to fit the client's property and expectations.

The PHC technician maintains landscape plants by:

- evaluating the landscape's environment
- noting causes of plant stress (stressors)
- maintaining plant performance through proper cultural practices
- investigating the landscape through monitoring
- identifying and treating problems as they occur

The following are examples of some common problems:

1. Many plant problems are related to improper matching of the plant's requirements to the landscape site.
2. Plants may have been improperly planted.
3. Plants may be subjected to improper maintenance techniques.
4. Often a combination of improper plant siting (wrong plant/wrong site), improper planting and improper maintenance techniques can cause plant stress and decline.

Your expectations

"A PHC technician also will consider your expectations when deciding how to implement a PHC treatment program," explains Andersen. As a client, one important question to ask yourself is when would you like to resort to chemical control for pest problems? Some clients will tolerate a greater percentage of plant damage before requiring action. Some clients will tolerate very little plant damage. Often a client will tolerate less damage on a prized ornamental specimen tree located in the front yard as opposed to a group of shade trees growing in the backyard. This requires the PHC technician to apply a higher action threshold to some trees and/or sections of the landscape than others. "Here, communication and understanding between the client and plant health care technician are key!" says Andersen. Treatment recommendations are then made to the client based on that client's expectations. The key to a successful plant health care program is communication between the client and PHC technician.

What to do

A professional arborist can examine your trees to find the source of the problem. A professional arborist can also recommend treatments, including thinning dense woods, planting new trees, correcting soil deficiencies, increasing water and nutrients, or pest management. Homeowners can contact the Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA), a public and professional resource on trees and arboriculture that was established in 1938. It has more than 2,000 member companies who recognize stringent safety and performance standards, and are required to carry liability insurance. TCIA also has an Accreditation program that requires companies to meet industry standards and qualifications, including ANSI A300 pruning standards. An easy way to find a professional tree care service provider in your area is to use TCIA's "Locate a member company program." You can use this service by calling 1-800-733-2622 or by doing a ZIP code search at: www.treecaretips.org