



Highlights: Tree Care

At some point, most homeowners will need to call a company to trim or remove trees. **Bay Area Consumers' CHECKBOOK**, available at www.checkbook.org, rates local tree care companies and strongly advises consumers to get multiple estimates for tree work, because there are often big price differences among companies. For example:

- For one specific job CHECKBOOK's mystery shoppers got bids for, prices ranged from \$1,825 to \$6,600.

While obtaining bids, keep in mind:

- Tree work is dangerous, not only to the people doing the work, but also to the people and property below. Be sure to get bids from reputable companies that are insured.
- It's pretty easy to collect proposals for tree work. Usually, it is possible to mark trees and leave specific instructions so that you don't have to be home when the estimator comes.
- Estimators can be hard to reach. Be prepared to leave a number where you can be reached in the evenings or on weekends.
- Because estimators don't always show up as promised, consider arranging to get estimates from more companies than you actually need; then call and cancel appointments when you have enough estimates.
- Get itemized, written bids to be sure you know what is being offered.
- For jobs that aren't pressing, consider having the work done in winter, when companies are less busy and there is less debris to haul away.

Before work begins, be sure to have a written contract that states whether matters like hauling away debris, cutting wood to firewood lengths, splitting or stacking wood, and stump removal are included in the price. Check whether a company's liability insurance and worker's compensation insurance are currently in effect. Ask to see certificates of insurance, and call the insurance carrier to verify. This is important because the nature of tree work is dangerous, and you don't want to be held liable should anything go wrong.

Finally, before signing a contract, customers should inquire about a company's payment policy to see how much of the total cost is payable upon completion of the job or later. Paying after the work is completed gives the consumer leverage to ensure that work is carried out properly and on time.

You can spot many tree problems yourself. Several times a year, examine your trees for the following:

- Discolored leaves and thinning in the tree's crown.
- Roots pulled loose from the ground and fungal growths on the roots or trunk.
- Dead and fallen branches more than two inches in diameter.
- Deep vertical cracks on opposite sides of the main trunk.
- Sawdust on the trunk from wood-boring insects.
- A trunk that noticeably leans in one direction and a branch canopy that is not roughly balanced.
- Other unusual deformations and deposits on leaves, limbs, or bark.

The media may cite selected examples of top-rated tree care services, as shown in the new issue of Bay Area Consumers' CHECKBOOK, and CHECKBOOK's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.