

# GUIDELINES FOR HIRING TREE SERVICES AND ARBORICULTURAL CONSULTANTS IN NEWCASTLE

## WHAT IS ARBORICULTURE?

Arboriculture is the practice of planting and caring for urban trees. An arborist, also known as an arboriculturist, manages and maintains urban trees. Arborists are employed mainly in local government and in the commercial tree services sector where they may contract tree removal and pruning services, or provide consulting services writing tree reports on a variety of matters such as risk, development impacts, tree planting projects and the like.

## WHAT ARE SUITABLE QUALIFICATIONS?

Qualifications delivered by TAFE NSW range from a Statement of Attainment, Certificates II, III and IV to Diploma level. They may also be referred to as AQF levels 1-5. Qualifications up to level III describe 'tree workers' and levels IV and V describe 'arborists' although these are not fixed titles. Occasionally people without formal qualification or AQF 1- III will claim the status of AQF IV-V arborist or consultant. As there is nothing to prevent this it is difficult to identify the appropriate tree care service or consultant. This is the reason this guideline is necessary. It is also one reason Council cannot list or recommend any tree service contractor, consultant or Association.

## BE AWARE !

When employing a commercial tree service or seeking consultant opinion on your trees be aware that there is no requirement for a commercial tree worker/arborist to be qualified or even insured in order to operate a tree service in NSW. In addition work practices are not standardised across the tree care and consulting sectors.

## INDUSTRY ASSOCIATIONS

Currently there are no industry associations representing the Hunter region tree sector. Some groups do exist in the Sydney region but they exercise differing degrees of control over member qualifications, methods of work and business practice. Some may not even require any formal qualification for membership. Just because a person adopts a title such as 'Consultant' or 'Tree Surgeon' does not necessarily mean they are appropriately qualified or experienced.

For these reasons it is most important that any person you contract to prune or remove trees, or to diagnose and report on tree risk and condition, is suitably qualified, experienced and adequately insured. It is very important to sight actual evidence of qualifications and insurance cover since there have been local instances of serious misrepresentation of qualifications and skills.

If you intend to **apply** to Council to remove a tree because of potential risk, then the assessing and reporting arborist must be suitably qualified.

If you intend to **apply** to Council to prune a tree then the person assessing the pruning must be suitably qualified and must prepare a written specification for you.

The nine points below will assist you to select a qualified tree service appropriate to your needs.

1. **Avoid people who present themselves as a 'lopper' or who offer you 'lopping' services.** Tree lopping (indiscriminate branch removal) and tree topping (cutting the top off a tree) are internationally discredited practices because they increase the risk of tree failure. Some Hunter regional contractors still offer tree 'lopping' and 'topping' as services. Such businesses sometimes also offer 'block clearing' and other non-tree related services.
2. **Get at least 2 and preferably 3 separate quotes** on your work. Ask each person who quotes for a **written quotation** that is dated and signed. If the job involves pruning you may need Council consent. Ask for a specification written in accordance with Australian Standard AS 4373 Pruning Amenity Trees.

3. Ensure that all persons quote in writing and on the same work. **NEVER ACCEPT A VERBAL DESCRIPTION AS THE SOLE DESCRIPTION OF WORK TO BE DONE.** A professional will always present a quote in writing and on business letterhead paper, and will give his/her full name, not just a first name. A professional will also provide a permanent phone contact rather than just a mobile number.
4. **Insist on and do check local references** by phoning the contractor or consultants previous clients and perhaps visit their past jobs. This is very worthwhile especially for potentially high risk work such as pruning or felling large trees. Some contractors leave a trail of minor damage, injuries and even deaths from commercial tree work. Ask if the contractor worked safely, did they use leg spikes to climb trees, (spikes should NEVER BE USED ON LIVE TREES unless being felled) what was the quality of clean-up; the general attitude to the work at hand and especially to employees. Ask if the work was specified in writing or based on a verbal description only.
5. **Beware of a contractor or consultant who wants to remove your tree.** Removal of live trees is sometimes necessary but should be a last resort. It is wise to seek a second opinion if a person condemns your tree and be aware that you may need Council consent before removing or pruning a tree. Some unethical and/or unqualified persons may prefer to present a healthy tree as a high risk if they think that's what you want, or if it means they get a contract to prune or remove it. Such persons will often refer to trees as highly dangerous objects to be removed or 'lopped' urgently.
6. **Ask if the contractor or consultant is a member of any industry association.** Membership does not guarantee qualifications, quality, or training, but lack of industry membership casts doubt on a person's professionalism.
7. **Ask to see the contractor or consultant's personal and liability insurance,** and where appropriate see their **workers compensation insurance.** Write down details and phone the insurance company to make certain the policy is current. A policy may have lapsed or may not adequately cover the type of work on offer. This is an area that is sometimes misrepresented so you should **always cross-check insurances before accepting a quote.** **BE AWARE THAT GENERAL HOUSEHOLD INSURANCE RARELY COVERS TREE WORK EXECUTED UNDER CONTRACT OR OPINIONS OFFERED BY CONSULTANTS.**
8. **A low price is a particularly poor gauge of a good quotation.** The better quote may be more expensive because of the use of specialised equipment, greater experience, more professional help, safer operations, improved employee responsibilities and appropriate insurance cover.
9. Ask potential contractors to include in their quotation a statement that their work will be undertaken to meet the NSW WorkCover Code of Practice for the Amenity Tree Industry which sets minimum standards for work place safety. Be aware that there are deaths and serious injuries from commercial tree pruning and felling work every year in NSW. The NSW WorkCover Authority describes the NSW commercial tree sector as the second-most dangerous industry in NSW.

If you would like further information regarding these guidelines please contact Councils Arborist on 4974 2676, or the Urban Trees Coordinator on 4974 6043.