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## Winter storms lead residents to wonder about tree safety



Photo Sora O'Doherty

The dying treetops on these trees on Camino Pablo are a sign of ill health, which means that these trees might fall in a bad storm.

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it is at a 45-degree angle over a house or has structural defects. In the category of possible danger are trees that are fine now, but might fall in the face of strong winds and extensive rains. But there are also trees that are classified as impossible, meaning that even high winds and heavy rains are unlikely to damage the tree, often because the tree is small or young.

So what are the warning signs that a homeowner might

be alert to? Sometimes a tree divides when growing and develops what are known as pre-dominant and co-dominant leaders, which are weaker than single trunks. In a storm, it is more likely that the co-dominant leader will break away from the tree.

The tree's age is also a factor. Some trees, such as oaks and redwoods, have very long lives, while other trees, such as birch and alder are shorter-lived. The years of drought have also affected trees, causing them to have a less exten-

sive root structure and even adversely affecting the molecular and microbial composition of the soil. Lamorinda has a lot of clay soil, which results in more shallow root structures in trees.

Another thing that Ghavamzadeh says affect trees negatively is poor pruning, often by people with little training or experience. For example, he pointed to the practice known as "lion-tailing," in which the limbs of a tree, often a heritage oak tree, are cleared of foliage from the center of the tree outward, leaving a tuft of leaves at the very end, resembling a lion's tail. This practice encourages trees to grow further and further out, and eventually branches will fall. This type of pruning error cannot be easily corrected and may cause the loss of trees that are 300 to 400 years old.

Many trees fell in the winter storms this year across Lamorinda. One thing that readers might not be aware of, Ghavamzadeh says, is that the state of California actively promoted the planting of Monterey pine trees in Lamorinda to help stabilize the hillsides. The Monterey pine seemed to be a good choice because it tolerated

clay soils, which are prevalent in Lamorinda. But drought, insect infestations, and fungus have taken a toll on the trees, which have a much shorter life span than other local trees such as redwoods and oaks.

Public organizations, such as the East Bay Municipal Utility District and the East Bay Regional Park District have been attempting to remove thousands of dead trees on lands that they own to reduce the risk of fire. Last year Marcus Wagner, Caltrans public information officer, spoke to Lamorinda Weekly about the removal of dead and dying trees along Highway 24. He said that the increase in tree mortality was most likely due to stress

brought about by several years of severe drought and invasive pests such as bark beetles. Dead or dying "red-needle" trees are of concern as the needles can become flying embers and help create the conditions for rapid wildfire spread. In their weakened condition, these trees could also possibly fall and obstruct portions of the roadway.

Traverso Tree Service in Martinez offers this advice on monitoring the health of your tree: "The best way to care for your pine is to look up. Make it a habit to look up and observe the whole tree and especially its top. If your pine is starting to decline, the top is generally where it will start."



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**Mike Rosa**

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