

Tree Man

Written by CAROL POMEDAY
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Port Washington arborist Jon Crain loves trees, but sometimes he has to cut them down, even if it means going to a place he once feared—high up in the branches.

It's not often the subject is 50 feet up in a tree when giving an interview.

But that's where Jon Crain, the City of Port Washington's arborist and the only member of his staff trained to climb trees, is comfortable.

As he talked, occasionally swinging in his tethered saddle, Crain, who was equipped with a chainsaw, pole saw and a hand saw, pruned a large willow in the front yard of his Port home. That morning, he helped a friend plant trees.

Crain loves trees.



That's why he decided to major in urban forestry at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, even though he is afraid of heights.

That's right — he's afraid of heights and still doesn't like climbing tall ladders or getting on high roofs.

"I'll never forget the first tree I climbed. I was shaking so bad, and I wouldn't move out of the spot the whole day," Crain said.

"My boss knew what was happening and said, 'Once you get comfortable, you're going to love it.'"

Crain said he almost quit that day, but after a few more climbs, he discovered his boss was right.

"Now, it's fun," he said from his tall perch. "I'm up here and I'm looking around, and it's like being a kid again."

Early in his tree-climbing career, Crain, now 37 and the father of two boys, ages 4 and 6, said he was willing to take on almost any tree. He would go to great heights to top a tree and cut off limbs as he descended, making sure they fell where

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they should.

Before he became the city's arborist, Crain had his own tree trimming business.

"I'm more on the end of preserving trees — pruning them properly and trying to save trees," he said.

"But when a tree needs to come down, it's fun to figure out how to do it. I don't do the big dangerous stuff anymore. There are guys that are better than me who love the thrill of taking it down."

People often ask him if he's afraid of falling when he's high in a tree, but Crain said that's the last thing he worries about.

"It's all about respecting the tree and respecting the height you're at," he said.

The times he's had accidents, Crain said, were when he was too comfortable and became careless or pushed the envelope, defying high winds.

"One time in Oak Creek, I sent a limb through a woman's garage," Crain said.

"I was 80 feet up in a honey locust and I was making my last cut, which I shouldn't have done because the wind was kicking up. But if I stopped, I would have to come back.

"The limb got away from me and the wind sent it through the garage door."

Crain had to tell the homeowner what he had done.

She told him, "I knew you shouldn't have been up there. You're lucky to be alive."

Another time, a chainsaw kicked back into his face and he lost two teeth.

"Luckily, I was holding it properly so the chain brake worked," Crain said.

"It made me stop and think that I could have been dead. It still scares me when I think about it. You have to take that extra second to be careful."

Crain said his first rule is to never do tree work from a ladder. A saw or limb can hit the trimmer or the ladder.

"The scariest thing is when a homeowner tells me, 'I'll do it myself with a ladder,'" Crain said.

"I try to explain why that's too dangerous without coming off as this macho, know-it-all, tree-climbing guy."

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One time, Crain saw a guy standing on a ladder reaching into a tree with a chainsaw.

“That time, I actually stopped the guy,” he said. “If I hadn’t, he would have probably killed himself.”

The guy got down and was receptive to his advice, he said.

Over the years, Crain said, he’s learned tricks to make tree climbing easier and safer.

“A good arborist is a lazy one because we find easier ways to do things,” Crain said.

He carefully inspects each tree, looking for signs of decay and weakness.

“Any kind of mushroom indicates decay in the tree,” Crain said.

He plans the attack with the help of his ground person.

“I never go in a tree alone,” Crain said. “I always have someone on the ground who knows the plan and can anticipate what’s going to happen.

“You want a good plan when you go up, but you’re looking at from the ground, and a lot of times it changes when you get to the top.”

He communicates with his ground person through signals.

“For instance, you rap on your helmet when something is coming down,” he said.

Crain looks for a spot in the center of the tree to set his line, then uses a slingshot to send an 8-ounce shot into the tree. The rope is pulled through a loop attached to the shot.

Crain uses a foot-locking technique to walk up the rope, wrapping the rope around his foot as he ascends.

“It looks like I’m pulling myself up by the rope, but I’m actually walking up the rope, which saves a lot of energy,” Crain said.

Before he goes into the tree, Crain ties his chainsaw to the end of the rope. When he’s in the tree, he pulls the saw up.

When he’s not using the pole saw, he hangs it on a limb far away from him with the blade pointing in the opposite direction so it won’t fall into him if the limb breaks.

When the top of a tree is removed or a large branch cut off, it is a shock to the tree and the whole trunk shakes. The climber has to be prepared for

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that, Crain said.

“There are different ways to do it to minimize the shock on the tree,” Crain said. “You want to be efficient, but you don’t want to go too big. When in doubt, go small.”

Trimming a tree properly will extend its life, Crain said, allowing the wind to blow through it and removing branches that are crossed or rubbing against each other, which cause structural weakness.

Willow trees are money-makers for tree trimmers because they’re the first ones to come down in a storm, Crain said.

“First it’s willows, then box elders and then silver maples,” he said.

Crain doesn’t climb as many trees as he used to because the city has bucket trucks that reach to the top of most trees.

“It’s a whole different ball game with a bucket truck,” Crain said. “You’re not attached to the tree. You’re not a part of it.”

But there are areas where a bucket truck won’t fit. Then Crain gets to climb a tree.

He plans to teach his two assistants to climb trees this winter so they’re ready in spring.

“The emerald ash borer is going to keep us busy for the next couple of years,” Crain said.

The city is treating about half of its 1,100 ash trees and will remove others when they are infested.

Crain is checking into the cost of hiring someone to cut the trees for lumber and also toying with buying a sawmill to make the lumber to replace boards on city benches.

“We want to do what’s most cost effective,” he said.

Crain chooses the types and locations for city-owned trees and advises developers.

“I love my job. I like the fact that I’m more managing the trees for the city. I enjoy the science of it,” Crain said.

“The biggest thing now is diversity so we don’t run into another epidemic like this — knowing what trees will do well in our soil conditions and our climate.”

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