Your “normal” Pin Oak *Quercus palustris*

Pin oaks are a common and beloved urban tree in the Iowa Quad Cities. When they are young or properly pruned, they are beautiful. As they mature in an urban setting, they typically develop lots of unsightly dead twigs and water sprouts. They can be kept nice if proper maintenance is started early and done regularly. If neglected or abused, they can usually still be restored to an attractive state. This can be very invasive and expensive depending on the level of neglect and abuse the tree has endured. The "normal" pin oak has endured lots of both.

Pin oaks generate lots of water sprouts which die. These old, dead sprouts are retained in a tangled mess with the new sprouts. We spend a long time in these trees, make thousands of cuts and remove almost as much as we retain. There will still be lots of dead at the ends of branches after a thorough pruning. This is the natural state of this tree.

When we are asked to prune a "normal" pin oak the task is rarely small. Customers are often shocked at the price of this service. We fully expect our price to be higher than our competitors. There are very good reasons.

We cannot utilize a bucket truck in this meticulous task. Most of the work is buried deep in the dense canopy where a bucket cannot penetrate. It is not uncommon for 2 – 4 skilled climbers to endure a miserable 8-hour day in a single pin oak. We don’t know how to do a minor pruning on a tree that requires major pruning. Attempting to do so would be logistically difficult and a disservice to you. Our passion and pride prevent us from even trying.

As professional arborists, we are cautioned to avoid lion-tailing. Lion-tailing is removing all of the interior foliage from a leader or lateral leaving foliage only at the ends. Imagine a lion’s tail. With pin oaks, it is almost impossible to avoid this practice since the interior is a tangled mess of dead and water sprouts that will die later.

Pin oaks are susceptible to a fatal disease called oak wilt. The vector for oak wilt is the nitidulid beetle. Pin oaks (and all oaks) must be pruned after the nitidulid beetle becomes dormant each year. This has much to do with temperature and more to do with phenology. This window to safely prune oaks grows smaller most years. It is currently only November through March when the ground and trees are often snow covered.

When we prune oaks, the leaves are brown or absent. Many oaks are marcescent, retaining their withered brown leaves for much of the winter. We are often asked how we can tell which limbs are live, and which are dead during dormancy. Since we never prune oaks when they are green, we have developed skills employing 3 of our 5 senses to discern live from dead wood:

Sight - dead wood looks and moves differently from live. If in doubt we give a branch the "wiggle test". Dead wood moves stiffly. Live wood bends as if it were rubber.

Sound - a quick tap of our hand saw elicits distinctly different sounds on live and dead wood.

Touch - dead wood has a brittle, rough feel, live wood has a limber, waxy feel.

We have not employed smell or taste in this endeavor... yet.

We confidently and thoroughly remove all the large dead from the interior of dormant pin oaks. It is a huge job as almost *all* of the interior is dead.

After a professional pruning, the death of many of a pin oak's branches continues. Many of the retained live limbs die. Additionally, the water sprouts will soon return and then die. This is normal. We fully expect your pin oak to have dead wood in the spring and summer following our winter pruning. These are not "missed" limbs. It is the completely normal state of a pin oak to have lots of dead in it.

Pin oaks are a filthy, high maintenance tree. There will always be dead wood in your "normal" pin oak. However, with proper care they can be tidy and majestic.

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