Every other week I have a chance to rise up on my soapbox and preach a little education about horticulture. Some weeks I get lots of phone calls and responses, other weeks I hear nothing. After the crapemyrtle article two weeks ago, I decided that it is the controversial topics that elicit reactions. So here we go again…

As I was driving through town last week, I noticed the beginning of a very popular seasonal trend. Some call it pruning, others call it cutting back, but what I saw last week in Lumberton was definitely a case of tree topping. What was once a gorgeous 30 foot red maple tree had been reduced to a 15 foot hat rack.

I told myself to keep driving and just let it be, but the educator inside me could not be quieted. I quickly turned around and made my way into the parking lot. I slowly approached the crew, identified myself, and asked a few questions. Why were they pruning so drastically? Was there a certified arborist or tree worker on the crew? Were they working for a local landscape company? The answers I received were alarming, but far from out of the ordinary. There were no ordinances restricting the size of the trees in that particular instance, but the crew had been hired to ‘prune’ so they were doing their job. There was not an arborist, nor someone with any basic landscaping training. This was a contract company that was hired to do a job from across the state. The crew member I spoke with was very receptive and seemed genuinely interested in what I was explaining to him. I gave him my card, returned to vehicle, and headed back to the office. I have not returned down that street as of yet, but I can only hope that the remaining trees did not end up looking like the first.

It does not take much for someone to hook a trailer to their truck, buy a chainsaw, weed eater, or mower, slap a magnetic logo to the side, and call themselves a landscaper or tree trimmer. But, once you take all the equipment and fancy logo away, what is left? Is that crew trained, licensed, certified, or insured? What do you as the customer need to know in order to assure you have hired the highest quality professionals possible? Because in the end, we as homeowners and consumers are responsible for who we hire and what we ask them to do.

Insurance, licenses, certifications, education, and training are some of basic topics you should ask about when hiring a landscape or tree worker professional. Insurance is a must! These
companies should carry insurance to protect you as the homeowner if something were to happen while on your property. Ask about a pesticide license. In the state of North Carolina, anyone who applies pesticides for a fee must be licensed by the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services as a commercial pesticide applicator. In regards to tree work, there are few important certifications to ask about. The International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) provides certification to individuals who complete a rigorous series of educational requirements and exams about the proper care of trees. Certifications are not the last straw. Ask about the education that the individual or company has. From technical schools and colleges to Cooperative Extension, there are many outlets where great education can be obtained. Last, but not least, ask about training. It may sound redundant, but is that certified arborist or landscape professional going to be the one doing the work at your house? Make sure that the entire crew has training on what you are asking them to do.

Taking a few steps when hiring your landscape or tree work professional can save you a lot of money and heartache in the end. That red maple I watched turn into a hat rack last week will never return to its former glory. The branch attachments will be weak and prone to breaking, watersprouts will emerge from the cuts creating a witches broom effect, and next year someone will come back and do it all over again. If properly pruned, the tree would have had a beautiful shape and lived well over fifty years providing great shade and gorgeous structure to the surroundings. As it stands now, that tree is going to be an eyesore in the winter and live twenty years at most.

It is not the people doing the work that we should find fault with. The crew that I spoke with last week was doing the job they were asked to do. It is us, as homeowners, who should be educated on how to ensure we are hiring quality trained professionals. If you would like more information on hiring landscape professionals or proper pruning techniques, please contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, by E-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu or by phone at (910) 671-3276 or visit Robeson County Center’s website at robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.