

Climbing Vs. Bucket Lifts: Preferences in Tree Trimming

Source: Tree Care Industry Association

There are two ways to trim a tree - climb it or use an aerial lift truck. Certain circumstances clearly call for one method over the other and sometimes a combination of both ways does the best job. For the most part though, arborists prefer either climbing or lifts and resist compromise.

David Halsted, founder of the Oregon Arboriculture Co., in Portland OR, has been called "violently opposed" to using bucket lifts. A born and bred climber, Halsted laughs at the severity of this description, but truly thinks proper trimming is only done through the eyes of the climber. After 18 years in the business, 12 on his own, his words cannot fully say why.

"I know there is a good explanation and I know the results of my work compared to other tree surgery companies," says Halsted. After preparing a talk for six months on his reasons for climbing, most of his audience said they understood and that he had no other choice but climb the huge trees of the Pacific Northwest. There are Douglas firs 20 feet through 300 feet high and Sitka spruce that extend 40 feet around and oaks that carry 300 foot spreads but all these do not prove his reasoning.

"Tree surgery is a type of pruning that you have to be extremely sensitive to what you're doing," Halsted says. "The only way you can do that is from working within the tree. You can't be isolated from it, and even if you're sticking up through it and try to design the tree the way you want it, it's like cutting blackberries or brush from a distance."

"I could find more character, more design, and more creativity from working within the tree," he says. And the fact exists that some of the trees are just too tall for a lift, or if in a back yard, too inaccessible. "You add all these things together and the love for my work and that's all I can do to total it."

"I've seen my boys go into work in the morning and they'll knock off at noon because they just don't feel right or can't get into it. They'll stop because they're not performing the way they should be. I think our quality is better than anyone in a lift bucket unless he has the same moral attitude, and if he did that he'd be doing it by hand because it would be too expensive to use a bucket. If he was taking the time to do the tree the way he should it would take longer or as long as a bucket."

One day Halsted had the job of taking care of a pioneer apple tree that the Hudson Bay Co. planted in 1826. Because of its immense historical value, he sent the best of his nine skilled tree surgeons to do the job, a job that would take about five hours. The surgeon came back after a while and told Halsted he was having trouble with the tree and couldn't get it to come out. "I told him it's just an apple tree - trim it and get it done." The trimmer asked for his help but Halsted refused, remembering something his boss had told him long ago.

When the tree surgeon had finished the job, it had taken him a total of 14 hours. He said he was done with it and hoped it was all right. "I went over later to look at it and there wasn't a leaf out of place. I asked him why it took so long and he said since the tree was the oldest apple around, he realized its value and became emotionally involved with his work."

"These are the kind of people I have and this is the type of thing we do. It's what makes us number one. We haven't reached the peak yet and still have a ways to go," says Halsted.

Some of his customers include major architectural firms in the Northwest, eight or nine out of 14 spraying companies in the Portland area and public and private owners of several national and state champion trees. He charges \$35 an hour and is loaded with work.

Without trying to sound arrogant but with a tone that is set through experience, Halsted says, "Our customers qualify for us; we don't qualify for them." He doesn't do any work that requires bidding, except some government contracts which demand it, because he doesn't believe money should be the main determinant of the contract. He does little advertising. Most of his jobs come from word of mouth and his reputation.

Halsted won't argue that some circumstances justify using a bucket lift. A vicious ice storm in January 1979 forced his crew to work at a furious pace for the next five months. With a bucket truck, the men were able to pull broken and torn trees away from the Portland Art Museum to reopen it to the public. The crew worked seven days a week but was split in two so they still had two days off.

In one-on-one competition, Halsted thinks a man in a bucket truck could do an equivalent job to a climber, if both had the same amount of time and money was no factor. "But time after time after time that man in the bucket is going to get careless because he's not part of what he's doing," Halsted says. "He can not be sensitive to that tree because he's not touching it, not feeling it.

The city forester in Portland once complimented Halsted on doing the best with what he had to work with on each tree. Halsted thinks some operations will usually do a good job, but not always consistently. "Ours is the same all the time. When our guy goes out, he doesn't know how many hours he has to spend on the job and he doesn't know how much the price is. He goes out and does that tree. When he gets done, he puts the time down and turns it in. That means he can do the same identical job each time. The only deviation from that is his own personal hangups which don't deter too much from the work."

Halsted says, "You start putting up a bucket through a tree and you can be careful and delicate but one of the things the truck is for is speed. You start pushing yourself and get careless and can break a branch. Instead of getting out of a bucket and into a tree on a branch you can't reach, you say 'the hell with it' and cut it off from there."

"Another thing I don't care for with the bucket trucks is that you're working from the outside in. Pruning should be done from the inside out. Your cuts should be made toward the tree because the branch grows out and when you make a flush cut, you make a flush cut toward the tree."

Working from within the tree is also important, Halsted thinks, because a tree surgeon can see how much light to let through the tree. "Our work is a lot of structure and growth control," he says. "There are little things like trimming to the north. You make your cuts so a branch turns to the north and down because everything around here grows up and toward the south."

Halsted's crew has used a lift truck on some trees, such as large elms, for 60 days and has done its usual expert job. But at the end of that time, Halsted thinks, a trimmer will start to become careless. Also, a man can easily go from climbing to a lift, but not vice versa. "You ask a man to come down from his "throne" and ask him to hike up a mile and do some trimming and they just hurt and have a miserable day," says Halsted. "They're not used to it after riding around in a bucket all day."

Before Halsted began his own business, he worked with two other men in Eugene, OR, trimming trees for the city. They not only cleaned out the trees and made them structurally safe, but also raised them up for the streets, stop signs, and signal lights. When two of them quit, the city hired two others who were not as fast so it bought a bucket lift to speed up work. They did more trees, "but weren't trimming," Halsted says. "What they did was stop trimming and start line cleaning. The guys say now they don't have time to trim; they only have time to raise trees for the streets. We used to go through them and do them so they lasted five years.

Ultimately, however you trim, the bottom line depends on results. Halsted compares the appearance he brings out of a tree to what a barber can do to a head of hair, only in a sequence of years instead of weeks. The first impression is that you have trimmed out too much, but then you realize you have enhanced. "They look handsome; you draw out the shape and a little limb structure," he says. The second year they look very nice, the third year excellent, and by the fourth year they start to get thick and may need a new trim.

"I fought going into business for myself in the beginning. I knew that it would take me away from my work and I didn't want to be away from it. I was forced to because the people didn't have anybody." Halsted has since turned the business into a shared ownership corporation, making a man a director after two years of service. "I used to have 100 percent of the company and I gave 300 percent away and now I have 500 percent," he says.

No matter how large the corporation grows and how much work comes with it, Halsted will not be using many bucket lifts. "There have been many times in the last 10 years that I wanted to buy aerial equipment because I could make money off it," he says. "I saw what it had done to other people and I fought myself against it. It's like something you don't believe in. You know it's not right or but you believe in it and become stronger. After that point goes by, you can rationalize and come up with some theories."

John Hawthorne, owner of Hawthorne Bros. Tree Service, has worked without a bucket lift, but since he purchased one in 1972, he's been using it constantly. His private tree care firm in Westchester County, NY, operates its 52 foot Hi-Ranger 100 percent of the time. "It's helped us tremendously," says Hawthorne, "It's worth it's weight in gold."

Hawthorne would not disagree with Halsted that it takes a qualified person to take care of trees. He just feels there's no reason you can't use a bucket truck. "A man should know how to climb and at least the basics of pruning before operating a lift," says Hawthorne. "We don't send anybody up in trees who doesn't know how to work by hand first. I think that's basic to doing a good pruning job." Only in utility work, where the company is not concerned about structure, could a man get away without full expertise.

"I'd say about 75 percent of our jobs can be done with a bucket truck." Back yards do pose some limitations, says Hawthorne, but he has moved shrubbery, fences, and stone walls to get to a job that involves a dangerous take down.

In a case where an 80 foot oak tree had died three years ago and now hangs over a house with new residents who want it moved, it's too risky to send a climber amidst dangling branches and a cracked trunk. Hawthorne also wouldn't send a man up in a tree that's been hit by lightning. "It's possible that a man in a bucket truck could be hit, but he's got more control over where he is. He's not tied to the tree. He can get away. The chances aren't as good that the bucket truck will fall down as much as the tree."

In storm damage, it's the same case. Where there are broken or hanging limbs that have to be moved, it is easier to lift them off from a bucket truck. "A climber takes the chance of something falling on him," says Hawthorne.

At one time, it took three men, two ladders, and hedge trimmers three or four days to trim a 20-foot hemlock hedge. With a bucket truck, one man can do the job in one day.

"When you have a disease in a tree, such as cytospora canker on spruce trees, it's much easier to prune out when you're away from the tree because you can spot the diseased limbs and snip them away from the bucket truck," Hawthorne says. "It takes two men without a bucket truck. One has to be in the tree and one outside to spot where the disease is. The color on branches changes very subtly sometimes and a man outside can

spot trees much easier. It's also easier to trim a Colorado blue spruce from the outside because it's so tight on the inside."

In most tightly branched trees, where a bucket couldn't maneuver well, Hawthorne would use climbers. "It's hard for a bucket truck to do maples, but any widely-spaced branching tree is easier to do on a bucket truck," he says. This includes red and white oaks, sycamores, and many others. "Either you put two climbers in a tree to prune it or you can use one man in a bucket truck to prune it by himself. It's much easier than having to go all the way down the trunk, out a limb, or swing across."

Hawthorne's crew also finds a bucket lift helpful for pollarding, shaping, and topping trees. The bucket maneuvers around the end of limbs for convenient access to the perimeter of the tree and gets to the top of a tree, which could never support a climber. Moving around the perimeter also helps combat disease like twig gall on oak, which strikes the tips of branches. "A bucket operator can be in any position a climber can be in and he can get to them easier," Hawthorne says. "A bucket operator can swing away from a tree and at it from a 40-foot height and 30 or 40 feet away."

"We can get a better perspective than a climber because a bucket truck can be put right against a trunk or the operator can even climb out of it and up the tree if he wants. Often we'll use a bucket truck to take a guy up to the first branch of a tall tree. With 120-foot tulip poplars where the first limb may be 60 feet off the ground, we can get a climber in the tree much easier than trying to throw up ropes and set up ladders."

Although not a frequent job, cavity filling in high sections of trees is something Hawthorne's crew must sometimes do. "Instead of a man sitting in the saddle to dig the cavity out, he can stand in a bucket truck and work. Excavating a cavity can take two or three hours which can be very tiring in a saddle. Depending on the size of a cavity, you may have to make a couple of trips up a tree carrying cement, chisels, and other tools."

This seems to sum up much of what Hawthorne thinks is the main advantage of bucket trucks. They are a practical mechanical device which supplement man's abilities. He says "I would not say a man could trim a tree faster in a bucket truck, but he's not going to get as tired. A bucket truck operator could do more trees without being so winded.

A bucket truck is not for every tree. Hawthorne estimates he can probably get to 35 percent of his trees, but as far as all work goes - takedowns, shaping, pruning, and even spraying - he can use it on 75 percent of the trees in his area. He's received some contracts in towns with a good number of trees that would be too time consuming and costly to do without a lift. A smaller operation with a truck could expand and do many more jobs, he thinks.

Some of the unique jobs he's received because of the bucket lift include decorating Christmas trees, lifting solar panels onto roofs, changing lights in parking lots, raising advertising signs, elevating movie cameras and cameramen to photograph certain scenes, and spraying large areas.

Results are good, business gets better, and Hawthorne finds more things for his bucket truck to do everyday. Nobody has compared Hawthorne's trees to Halsted's. One is in the east and one in the west; one uses bucket lifts, one almost exclusively climbs. Both men think they are doing the proper job as arborists. They realize that without the skill, knowledge, and practice, their work and talk would be meaningless.

Tree Climbing Tools Increase Safety Margin

The safety record of arborists is proof of their professionalism. There is no place for carelessness in the business of tree trimming. Before taking the first step off the ground, the climber should thoroughly check to see that his equipment is complete and functioning properly, similar to a parachutist checking his gear before jumping.

Skimping on equipment is really skimping on safety. Some of the improvements in climbing gear include comfort, ease of use, and additional protection. Nothing is more disturbing to a climber than trouble with his equipment while in the tree. When a job takes two or more hours, a saddle can be unsafe just from a pain factor and lack of concentration on the job at hand. Safety equipment should be kept up to date to provide all the benefits of modern improvements.

For more specific information on safety standards equipment and procedures, each climber should have a copy of the American National Standards Institute publication ANSI Z133.1-1979, developed with the assistance of the National Arborists Association. To obtain a copy write NAA, 3537 Stratford Rd., Wantagh, NY 11793, or ANSI 1430 Broadway, New York, NY 10018.

If you don't meet the standards in this publication, then your climbing program is not as safe as it should be. A little precaution is cheaper in the long run than an injured employee or a careless public image.