

## Unintentional Arborcide

### HOW NOT TO KILL THE TREES IN YOUR LANDSCAPE

By Dr. Jerry Parsons

What is the biggest killer of trees? Especially in urban environments. The actions of people probably result in more tree deaths than all insects and diseases combined. I am not referring to those practices which well-meaning humans exercise daily on urban trees.

All trees in the urban environment are stressed, and this stress shortens urban trees' natural life span or results in their untimely death.

Many times, the action itself does not immediately kill a tree, but rather, sets in a motion a chain of events that ultimately shortens the tree's life. For instance, a wound may allow fungi decay to enter a tree. The tree and fungi begin to compete for the tree's carbohydrate reserves, resulting in a reduction of vigor. As the tree's health declines, borers and secondary fungi begin to invade the tree. Each contributing factor tips the scale against the tree, and in the end it succumbs to the accumulative effects.

**String-trimmers and mowers** are the leading cause of tree death. These "Instruments of Death" completely girdle thin-barked trees like crepe myr-

tle and the Texas persimmon, or cause wounds which allow fungi and insects to enter the tree. An informal survey of several neighborhoods indicated that 75% of the trees had some level of mechanical damage.



Besides the obvious benefits of weed-control, moisture retention and heat moderation, mulch creates a border that keeps your lawn mower and weed-wacker from wounding your trees and shrubs.

**Chemical abuse** has to be the second greatest killer of trees. Most broadleaf herbicides kill trees as well as weeds and are able to move readily through the soil. Weed and feed fertilizers are also notorious tree killers. The only solution to this problem is for people to read the label thoroughly and keep these herbicides away from trees, shrubs and flowers.

**Improper Planting.** Many people in San Antonio plant trees

too deep, or in holes which are too small. A tree planted too deep, especially in our clay soils, will suffocate due to a lack of oxygen. Trees should be planted with their ball or container tops at grade level.

**Over-watering.** Succumbing to the fallacy that if a little is good, a lot is better people have literally watered their trees to death. The secret is to use mulch and to water regularly and deeply.