

**INDUSTRY FOCUS**

Written by Remo Notarianni

Environmental awareness and public concerns about hazards posed by trees increase demand for arborists

# Career takes root in HK

**H**ong Kong is home to lush foliage, country parks and many species of trees that have flourished amid rapid urbanisation. But when greenery meets concrete it creates demand for experts that can solve problems related to plant life in cities. Horticulturists face new challenges as the care of trees and plants heralds a new era for the industry.

"Horticulture is a fairly substantial industry in Hong Kong," said Ian Robinson, director of Oriental Landscapes, a landscaping subsidiary of Swire Properties. "It took shape in new-town developments like Sha Tin and Fanling in the '70s through to the '90s. Companies started to need horticulturists; the industry became more sophisticated as they were dealing with landscape architects, and people needed to keep abreast of landscape practices."

In the wake of this, came garden developments such as Taikoo Shing. Spaces allocated for landscaping and greenery not only added value to property sales, they also renewed demand for horticulturists. An industry took shape with the best available talent, mostly coming from landscape architecture.

"A large number of landscape architects have been part of the industry for the past 30 years," Mr Robinson said. "But many landscape architects don't specifically know about many aspects of horticulture, and a lot of them simply bow to the wishes of developers."

"Anyone wanting to enter the industry in Hong Kong should try and get a job with a government department or with some landscape contractors. It is a case of building experience. There isn't, however, an

**HORTICULTURE**

**Key Players**

- Landscape architect
- Arborist
- Horticulturist
- Certified utility specialist

**Jargon**

- **Die back** death of many branches. The external condition of a tree can determine how sick it is
- **Pruning** trimming or removing dead branches or parts of trees to eliminate hazards or to improve air flow
- **Crown** reduction specific pruning technique for height restriction of trees by using hand saws, pole pruners or chain saws
- **Co-dominance** a process in which a tree splits into two equally sized trunks that break apart during growth, causing it to fall down
- **Wound dressing** a compound for covering cut branch ends

industry standard yet. Titles for landscape practitioners may have different meanings in different companies."

But options exist to standardise the industry. A case in point is the field of arboriculture, which has become globally standardised through certification from the International Society of

Arboriculture (ISA), a worldwide professional organisation. Arboriculture is now vital to Hong Kong, which is dealing with the consequences of mismanaged trees.

"In Hong Kong, I think there is more opportunity for people to become certified arborists," said Donald Picker, managing director of Asia Tree Preservation, which provides arboricultural services and training throughout Asia. "There's a demand for someone out there who can tell us why a tree has failed or why it may fail. And they should obviously become truly trained and professional in that field so that they can meet that need," said Mr Picker, who is a certified arborist based on the mainland.

He said demand for tree specialists was soaring as government departments and property developers were looking for industry professionals not only because of greater environmental awareness, but also the public's growing concern about the hazards that could arise from trees in urban areas. "In an urban environment, people expect [to be able to sit under a tree and be safe]."

Mr Picker said problems arose because of co-dominance where the growth of a tree could cause it to split into two equally sized trunks that broke apart. "This may be harmless in a remote forest, but is unsafe in a crowded urban area. There are other factors, such as disease and insects, and numerous problems that emerge from the transportation of trees bought from places such as the mainland and placed into property developments."

While some courses have long been available, including qualifications that can be taken in other countries in the region, the ISA

certification provides an internationally recognised industry standard. Categories extend to certified arborist, certified utility specialist, certified municipal specialist and certified tree worker or climber specialist.

This demonstrates how the industry has become increasingly professional and, as this happens, property developers will realise the importance of having such positions in their companies.

Joe Lau, one of the first six ISA certified arborists in Hong Kong, said the city had "risk trees" everywhere, and he welcomed more clearly defined credentials in the field. "This problem came about because of the wrong decisions made in past decades when many of our top management did not have knowledge of trees. Terrible accidents have put a lot of people in hot water, but now they have woken up."

A case in point was when a 100-year-old tree fell on Hong Kong teenager Kitty Chong Chung-yin in Stanley in August this year, killing her.

But a qualified workforce, which can prune trees and clear hazards, may take years to fully solve the problem.

"There's a bit of a rush on at the moment for providing courses and taking tests," Mr Robinson said. "And the 75 or so ISA certified arborists in Hong Kong will know principles about how an individual species can respond."

"But they need to work in the industry for five to six years to gain confidence. A person needs 10 to 15 years of experience of dealing with trees. People can see an opportunity and a profession that they can take on board to pursue as a career for the next 10 years."

**All In A Day's Work**

Written by Remo Notarianni

**Cutting out the problems**

With a love of the outdoors and a passion for trees, Donald Picker, managing director of Asia Tree Preservation, is ideally suited to caring for the environment

I always had a love of the outdoors and it became evident early on that I wasn't going to be sitting behind a desk for great lengths of time. I grew a garden as a young boy and was also interested in trees.

I had always been involved in one way or another with green industries and throughout my school years I was doing work at my wife's family's tree nursery, planting, drawing plans and landscaping. A natural knack for climbing made tree work ideal for me. After graduating in

linguistics and social research, I went to work for a tree company. Even before college, my climbing skills landed me a position at a power utility company, building power lines. I was climbing towers and constructing things in the air, which was a practical job that made me a lot of money because of dangerous practices, but the same union that was building power lines was also helping to clear them of tree branches, so I moved on to pruning trees.

Generally, if you work as a tree

worker, you either work on the ground or on the tree. You have to climb the tree and prune it. From there I rediscovered tree climbing. My experiences as a utility worker gave me an education on careful practices for climbing trees, and I learned more from an entrepreneurial approach when in 1984 I started my own tree-care company known as Picker Tree Experts in the Chicago region. I then became a certified arborist and have remained a practising one.

On any given day, I might be talking to the manager of a grounds or property or a developer who is trying to preserve the trees on a site as they figure out how to build around trees. I might meet with an architect or grounds manager who is trying to understand how we preserve trees. The next day, I might get into that same tree that we were discussing and actually do the pruning. I may have to go to places like Hong Kong Golf Club to discuss with the grounds people how to bring in more light and brighten up a tee area.

I tell my workers to continue what I started, giving them the basic information. I provide training for apprentice tree workers and conduct assessments on trees considered potentially dangerous.

We need to look for plant problems and diseases. The outer condition of a tree can determine how bad the roots are. Initially, it might be a basic assessment but this can become a hazard assessment if we determine the tree has the potential to fail. We look for three factors: conditions that include the potential for a tree or part to fail, the size of the part that might fail and the presence of targets such as people or property.

In many cases, it might be the roots that are deteriorating. So we can get down on the ground and probe and see if there is any evidence of conks or mushrooms. Then we'll look at the outer core of the tree for fractures and cracks. We'll look for decay in holes, the amount of decay in the circumference and the amount of dead material in the crown.

Although we must maintain an effort to preserve trees, ultimately it's all about avoiding a dangerous situation that affects people.

**Donald Picker grew up around trees and has a natural knack for climbing them. Photo: Felix Wong**

