

# The Tree Triage Field Kit™

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## Turn Your New Diagnostic Eyes Into a Fast, Organized System for Every Tree on Your Property

*A companion to "Warning: Read Before It's Too Late - 5 Signs Your Tree Is Dying Right in Front of You™"*

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## A Quick Word Before We Start

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If you've just finished the main guide, something has probably already happened to you. You stepped outside, looked at a tree you've walked past a thousand times, and you saw something. Yellowing leaves in summer when they shouldn't be. Thinning up at the 10-to-2 part of the canopy. Maybe a root crossing over another root at the base.

That's the thunderstruck moment. I watched it happen for 22 years, standing right next to homeowners in their own yards. They'd go quiet. They'd point. And then they'd say some version of the same thing: *"How did I never see that?"*

Here's the part nobody tells you, though: seeing it once isn't enough.

Here's what happens. You diagnose your big oak out front, you get that jolt of recognition — and then life happens. The week fills up. You've got three other trees out back you haven't looked at yet. Six weeks go by and you can't quite remember whether the canopy thinning looked *this* bad last time or whether it's gotten worse. And the one piece of information that matters most — *is this tree getting better or worse?* — slips right through your fingers.

That's the gap this Field Kit closes.

It doesn't teach you anything new about diagnosing trees. You already have that from the main guide. What it does is take the exact same 5-sign inspection you just learned and turn it into a fast, written, repeatable system you can run on *every* tree you own, season after season, without losing track of a thing.

Think of it this way: the main guide gave you the arborist's eyes. This gives you the arborist's clipboard.

From one tree person to another — let's get you organized.

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## What This Is (and What It Isn't)

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I want to be clear about this — because being clear is something I've always taken seriously.

**The Tree Triage Field Kit™ is a system for capturing, organizing, and tracking the 5-sign inspection you already know how to do.** Four working parts, that's it:

1. **The Field Inspection Card** — a simple written form you fill out for each tree so nothing gets missed and nothing gets forgotten.
2. **The Multi-Tree Tracking Log** — one page that holds every tree on your property side by side, so you can see your whole "patient list" at a glance.
3. **The Red-Flag Triage Method** — a fast way to rank your trees so you know which one needs your attention *first*, because not every tree is equally urgent.
4. **The Seasonal Re-Check Rhythm** — a simple calendar habit so you catch decline early, every year, instead of stumbling onto it by accident.

Here's what it is NOT: a new set of warning signs to memorize. Not a new collection of tree problems to worry about. Not the rescue-and-repair process either — that's a different conversation entirely. This is purely about making the diagnosis you already know how to do *faster, more organized, and repeatable* — so a struggling tree never again slips by unnoticed until it's too late.

Everything here works with two things you already own: your trees, and the diagnostic eyes the main guide just gave you. No apps. No gadgets. No logins. A printed page, a pen, and fifteen minutes. That's deliberate. I want you out in the yard *looking at your trees* — not staring at a screen.

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## Why a System Beats a Memory (Every Single Time)

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Let me tell you something I watched play out hundreds of times over 22 years — and it never got less frustrating.

Tree decline is *slow*. That's exactly what makes it so dangerous. A tree doesn't die overnight. It fades over seasons. Over years. And the human eye is genuinely terrible at noticing gradual change in something it sees every single day. It's the same reason you don't notice your kids growing until a relative who hasn't seen them in a year walks in the door and gasps.

That's the whole trap.

Because the decline is gradual, your memory smooths right over it. *Eh, it's always looked a little thin up top.* And meanwhile, that canopy is quietly creeping toward the 25% loss mark — the point where, in my experience, it's usually too late to save the tree. The tree was sending signals the whole time. You just had nothing to measure them against.

A written record defeats this completely. When you can look at a page and see that your maple showed 2 warning signs last spring and 4 this spring, there's no arguing with it. No smoothing it over. The page remembers what your eye forgets. And that written comparison — that simple side-by-side — is often the single thing that gets a homeowner to act while there's still time.

Here's what I'd tell every homeowner who thought they were paying close attention: *Your memory isn't the problem. Memory just wasn't built for this job.* Written records were.

That's the quiet power of the Field Kit. It's not flashy. It's a pen and a page. But it turns *'I think it might be getting worse?'* into *'I know it's getting worse, here's the proof, and I'm acting now.'*

That's not a small thing. That's the difference between watching a tree die and doing something about it in time.

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## **Part 1: The Field Inspection Card**

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This is the heart of the kit. The Field Inspection Card walks you through the same 5-sign inspection from the main guide, but in a fixed order with a place to write everything down. The order matters — it takes you from the top of the tree down to the ground, so you never double back and never skip a sign.

Here's how to use it: print one card per tree. If your printer's giving you grief, just copy it onto a notepad — the format is simple enough to redraw by hand. Carry it out to the tree, start at the top, and work your way down. Check off each sign you find and jot a quick note. Once you've done it once or twice, the whole thing takes about 3 to 4 minutes per tree.

## Tree Triage Field Inspection Card (Part 1: Signs 1–3)

Tree Nickname/Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Tree Type (if known): \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Inspection: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGN 1 - Leaf Scorching (yellowing/browning in spring or summer)

- Present? Yes / No

- Which part of tree: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGN 2 - Tip Die-Back (branch ends shedding leaves / dying back)

- Present? Yes / No

- How far in from the tips: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGN 3 - Canopy Thinning (10 to 2 o'clock / upper canopy)

- Present? Yes / No

- Roughly how thin (light / moderate / heavy): \_\_\_\_\_

## Tree Triage Field Inspection Card (Part 2: Signs 4–5 & Tally)

Tree Nickname/Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Tree Type (if known): \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Inspection: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGN 4 - Dark or Black Bark / Foamy Ooze (from lenticels)

- Present? Yes / No

- Where on the trunk: \_\_\_\_\_

SIGN 5 - Girdling Roots (roots crossing/strangling other roots)

- Present? Yes / No

- How many visible: \_\_\_\_\_

--- TALLY ---

Total signs present (0-5): \_\_\_\_\_

Mulch Pull-Back Test done? Yes / No

Soil under mulch was: Moist / Damp / Bone Dry

Fill in one card per tree. Circle Yes or No for each sign, then count up your total at the bottom.

Keep the completed cards together so you can compare them season to season.

### A Few Field Notes to Make This Faster

**Always start at the top.** Before you ever walk up to the trunk, stand back far enough to see the whole canopy. Signs 1, 2, and 3 — scorching, tip die-back, canopy thinning — all live up high, and they're easiest to read from a distance. If you walk straight in to the trunk first, you'll crane your neck and miss the big picture. Back up. Look up. *Then* walk in.

**Use the clock face for the canopy.** Remember from the main guide — thinning shows up classically from 10 to 2 o'clock, the upper third of the crown. Picture a clock laid over the tree. If you can see more sky through the top than you should, that's your Sign 3.

**Don't skip the mulch pull-back test.** Here's the part that leaves people speechless every single time. After a good hard rain, kneel down and pull the mulch back from the base with your hands. If the soil underneath is bone dry even though it just poured, you've found your smoking gun — the mulch is drinking all the water before a drop ever reaches the roots. Write down what you find on the card. And yes, you can do this test on a dry week too. It's just less dramatic when there's been no rain to prove the point.

**Note the *\*where\**, not just the *\*yes\**.** This is the part most people skip — and it's the part that pays off months later. When you write down *where* you saw the scorching or *how far in* the tip die-back goes, you give your future self something concrete to compare against. "Yellowing" is vague. "Yellowing across the whole south-facing side" is something you can actually re-check in three months and know for certain whether things are holding or getting worse.

That distinction matters more than most people realize. Vague notes give you a vague picture. Specific notes give you proof.

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## Part 2: The Multi-Tree Tracking Log

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Most homeowners don't have one tree. They have a yard. An oak out front, a couple of maples along the side, maybe a big old something-or-other in the back that came with the house. And here's a hard truth I learned on the job: people obsess over the one tree that worried them and completely ignore the other five — some of which were in worse shape.

The Multi-Tree Tracking Log fixes that. It's one page that holds your whole property. Every tree gets a row. You transfer the total sign count from each Field Inspection Card into this log, and suddenly you can see your entire "patient list" in one glance.

### Property-Wide Tree Tracking Log

Tree Nickname / Location	Signs (0-5)	Bone Dry Soil?	Date Checked	Priority (R/Y/G)	Notes
Front Oak					
Side Maple #1					
Side Maple #2					
Back Tree					

Fill in one row per tree. Pull the "Signs" number straight from each tree's Field Inspection Card, then assign a Priority color (R/Y/G) using the Red-Flag Triage Method in Part 3.

Keep this log somewhere you'll actually see it — taped inside a kitchen cabinet, tucked in a drawer with your other house papers, wherever it'll get looked at. The point is simple: your whole tree picture lives on one page instead of scattered across your memory.

And give your trees nicknames. "Front Oak." "Big Bertha." "The Lopsided One by the Fence." Whatever helps you keep them straight. It feels a little silly the first time. By your third inspection, you'll be grateful you did it.

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## **Part 3: The Red-Flag Triage Method™**

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Here's where the word "triage" earns its place. Emergency rooms use triage to sort patients by who needs help most urgently. Same idea here. Not every tree on your property is equally close to that 25% canopy point of no return — and your time and energy aren't unlimited. So we sort.

The Red-Flag Triage Method gives every tree one of three colors based on what you found in your inspection. Once your tracking log is filled in, it takes about ten seconds per tree.

## Red-Flag Triage Rankings

Signs Found	Priority	What It Means
0 signs	GREEN	Healthy for now - re-check next season
1-2 signs	YELLOW	Early warning - watch closely, act soon
3-5 signs	RED	Serious danger - act now, time is short

Now here's the part I want to be clear about — because the raw sign count isn't always the whole story. Two situations override the numbers, and they matter.

**Bone-dry soil bumps a tree up.** If your mulch pull-back test came back dry after a hard rain, treat that tree as one priority level higher than its sign count alone suggests. A tree with 2 signs *and* bone-dry soil should be RED, not YELLOW. Dry soil under mulch means the problem isn't old damage sitting there — it's active right now. Water deprivation is the engine behind all five signs. That test tells you the engine is still running.

**Any visible girdling root deserves extra weight.** Remember what I said earlier — for every girdling root you can see above the soil, there are usually 5 to 10 more hidden below that you can't. One visible root is the tip of the iceberg. If you spot girdling roots, lean toward the more urgent color. Don't talk yourself out of it.

Here's what this method does for you: it tells you exactly where to point your attention. A RED tree is your first conversation, your first phone call, your first move. A GREEN tree you simply keep an eye on. No more spreading your worry evenly across every tree in the yard.

You focus it where it counts.

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## Part 4: The Seasonal Re-Check Rhythm

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This is the part that turns a one-time scare into something lasting — real, ongoing protection for your trees.

A single inspection is a snapshot. But tree health is a *movie* — it changes season to season, year to year. The only way to know whether a tree is getting better or worse is to look at it at regular intervals and compare what you're seeing now to what you saw before. So we build a simple rhythm.

Here's the rhythm I recommend, and the reasoning behind each check:

- **Spring** — This is your most important inspection. Leaf scorching and canopy thinning show up loud and clear once the tree has leafed out, and you've got the whole growing season ahead of you to act. *Never skip the spring check.*

- **Mid-Summer** — Heat and drought stress peak right now. A tree that looked okay in spring can start showing scorching and tip die-back once summer turns up the pressure. This is also the best time for the mulch pull-back test — summer storms give you that dramatic bone-dry reveal.

- **Fall** — As leaves drop, the branch structure and canopy density open right up. Tip die-back that was hiding behind full summer foliage becomes obvious. It's also a good time to get a clear look at girdling roots once the ground-level growth dies back.

- **Winter (optional)** — With everything bare, the trunk, bark, and root flare are fully exposed. Great time to check for Sign 4 (dark bark and ooze) and Sign 5 (girdling roots) without a single leaf in the way.

Now here's what I want to be clear about: you don't need all four. If life only gives you time for two, make them **Spring and Mid-Summer** — that combination catches the vast majority of active decline. Use the calendar below to mark off each tree as you inspect it through the year.

### Seasonal Inspection Tracker

SPRING			SUMMER			FALL			WINTER		
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Each box represents one tree inspection in that season. Check off a box each time you complete a Field Inspection Card for a tree. Your goal is to fill the Spring and Summer columns at minimum.

## **How to Anchor the Habit So You Actually Do It**

Here's the honest truth about good intentions: they don't protect trees. Habits do.

The trick that works — and I've seen it work for homeowners who swore they'd never keep up with it — is this: attach each inspection to something you're already doing seasonally.

If you put out spring mulch, do your spring inspection the same weekend. And now that you've been through this whole guide, you already know to keep that mulch at 2 to 3 inches — not one inch more. If you clean the gutters in summer or open the pool, tack the summer check onto that same day. Tie the fall inspection to the leaf cleanup. Hook it to something that's already on your calendar, and it stops being a separate thing to remember — it just rides along.

Let me tell you something: a reminder buried in your phone is easy to swipe away. We've all done it. But *'I always inspect the trees the same weekend I put the mulch down'* — that sticks. Because it's bolted to something you're already doing, not floating out there on its own.

That's not a small thing. That's the difference between a good plan that gathers dust and one that actually keeps your trees alive.

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## Part 5: The Progress Comparison Sheet

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This is where everything pays off.

Once you've inspected a tree more than once, you can compare. And that comparison — that simple before-and-after — is the most valuable piece of information you can possibly have about any tree you're watching.

Pull the Field Inspection Cards for a single tree from two different dates and lay them side by side. Then ask one question: **Is the sign count going up, holding steady, or going down?**

- **Going UP** (more signs than last time) — the tree is actively declining. This is your action signal. Don't wait for the next scheduled check.
- **Holding STEADY** — the situation is stable, but stable isn't the same as safe. A struggling tree that isn't improving can tip into real decline faster than you'd think. Keep watching closely.
- **Going DOWN** (fewer signs, or signs clearly less severe) — whatever you're doing is working. Keep doing it.

Use this sheet to capture the comparison in writing:

## Tree Progress Comparison Sheet

Tree Nickname/Location: \_\_\_\_\_

### EARLIER CHECK

- Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Total signs (0-5): \_\_\_\_\_
- Soil test result: \_\_\_\_\_

### MOST RECENT CHECK

- Date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Total signs (0-5): \_\_\_\_\_
- Soil test result: \_\_\_\_\_

DIRECTION (circle one): IMPROVING / STEADY / DECLINING

My next action: \_\_\_\_\_

Complete this sheet whenever you've inspected the same tree twice. The "Direction" line is the single most important piece of information you'll record about any tree.

Here's what I want you to understand about that Direction line: this kind of comparison is exactly what used to require a professional eye and a professional invoice. I'd walk the yard, take mental notes, come back six months later, and tell a homeowner whether things were moving the right way or the wrong way. That was worth something — because nobody else was tracking it.

Now you're tracking it yourself. On paper. In a way nobody can wave off.

When you can point to a sheet and say *'three signs in spring, five signs now'* — you're not guessing anymore. You're not going on a feeling. You have evidence. And that's the most useful thing a homeowner can have when it comes to the trees on their property.

That's not a small thing. That's what changes the outcome.

## **Troubleshooting: Your Most Likely Questions**

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In 22 years, the same practical questions came up again and again once homeowners started watching their trees closely. Here are the ones most likely to come up as you put this system to work.

### **"What if I'm not 100% sure whether a sign is present?"**

Mark it present and put a question mark in the notes. When you're not sure, err toward caution — it's far better to over-watch a healthy tree than to wave off a declining one. On your next check, you'll have a baseline to compare against, and the uncertainty usually resolves itself. The tree will tell you more next time.

### **"Two of my trees are right next to each other. Do I really need separate cards?"**

Separate cards, every time. I've seen trees just five feet apart in completely different shape — different root competition, different foot traffic, mulch piled up on one and not the other. One card per trunk. No exceptions.

### **"My tree has zero signs. Do I still need to track it?"**

Absolutely. Here's why: a GREEN tree today tells you nothing about a GREEN tree next year unless you've written it down. The whole point is catching the *change*. A tree that goes from zero signs to two signs has told you something important — but only if you recorded that first zero. That zero is the evidence.

**"I found a RED tree. The kit doesn't tell me how to fix it — now what?"**

You're right, and that's by design. This system's job is to tell you *which* tree needs help and *how urgently*. Fixing a tree with compacted soil or girdling roots is its own process — relieving the compaction, dealing with the roots, getting the soil and mulch right. But here's what I want you to understand: the hardest part is already done. You caught the problem. You may still be inside the window to act, and that window is everything. Two things you can do today that never hurt: do the mulch pull-back test, and if the soil under there is bone dry, give the root zone a long, slow, deep soak.

**"How long does a full property inspection take once I'm set up?"**

After your first time through, figure 3 to 4 minutes per tree for the inspection, plus a couple of minutes to update your tracking log. A typical yard with four or five trees runs about 15 to 20 minutes, start to finish. That's less time than it takes to mow.

**"My printer's broken / I don't like printing. Can I still use this?"**

Completely. Every form here is simple enough to copy onto a notepad or into a notebook by hand. The format is what matters, not the printout. A spiral notebook with one tree per page works beautifully — and it keeps your whole history in one place.

## Your First 15 Minutes: Start Right Now

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Let's not let this sit on the pile of things you meant to get to. Here's exactly how to launch the system today.

**Minute 1–2:** Walk your property and count your trees. Give each one a nickname and write them into the Multi-Tree Tracking Log, one per row.

**Minute 3–12:** Pick the tree that worried you most — the one that sent you looking for answers in the first place. Take a Field Inspection Card out to it. Back up, look up, and work top to bottom through all five signs. Fill in the card completely, including the mulch pull-back test.

**Minute 13–14:** Transfer that tree's sign count to your tracking log and assign it a Red-Flag color using the triage table.

**Minute 15:** Look at your calendar and decide which seasonal chore you'll anchor your inspections to. Write it down. *I inspect when I mulch.* Done.

That's it. You've gone from one anxious look at one tree to an organized system covering your whole property — and you've built the foundation that will catch trouble early for as long as you own these trees.

Here's the part I want you to sit with for a second. The main guide gave you the eyes of an arborist. This system gives you the memory of one. Because it's not just about what you see today — it's about having something to compare it against next season, and the season after that. That's how you catch a tree that's slipping before it's too late to pull it back.

That's not a small thing. That's the difference between noticing a problem in time and finding out too late.

From one tree person to another — go fill out that first card.