

# Seattle Neighborhood Tree Guide



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## Seattle Neighborhood Tree Guide

This guide is for anyone who lives in a Seattle neighborhood and cares about trees. Which is just about everyone!

### I. Trees and You

Take a moment to think about your favorite tree in Seattle. It may be in your neighborhood, in a city park, or across town. It may be a conifer (green all year round) or deciduous (loses its leaves in the fall). Imagine sitting or standing under the tree. How does that feel? What do you love about it? What would your life be like if that tree weren't there?

Trees are the largest living beings on the planet. They bring all kinds of benefits to people who live near them and spend time among them. They provide beauty: flowers in spring, dappled sunlight in summer, leaves changing color in fall, aromatic evergreen boughs in winter. They cool us on hot days and shelter us from the rain. They provide homes for a wide range of birds and animals. Families build tree houses around them for play. Trees also help us in ways that aren't so visible. Research shows that they boost our immune systems, lift our mood and spirits, and lower our blood pressure. They stabilize soil, especially on slopes, prevent erosion, filter the air and water, remove pollutants, and store carbon. Preserving mature trees and planting new ones is one of the most important ways to prevent and mitigate climate change.

Many of us love trees but don't know how to take care of them. And we may watch them being cut by neighbors and developers and don't know what, if anything, we can do about it. This guide will give you some of the answers you need.





## II. Tree Basics and Getting Involved

Love the trees that live on the property where you live, but don't know how to take care of them properly? Want to plant more? Help is available. Here is the link to the Trees for Seattle website, which contains important information about planting and care, tree regulations, Seattle's tree canopy cover, and more.

[Planting and care](#)

[Pruning](#)

[Tree Pruning Cue Card](#)

[Pruning Mature Trees](#)

[Tree Regulations in Seattle](#)

### Learn With Others!

Interested in gaining some hand-on experience with the pros? [City Fruit](#), [UW Botanic Gardens](#), and [Plant Amnesty](#) all offer hands-on structural pruning courses in Seattle. Learn more by visiting their webpages and contacting them about their upcoming class schedule.

***If you think something is wrong with one of your trees, call an arborist first to trim your tree – a quick fix may be all that's needed***



### III. Find an Arborist

#### What is an arborist and why are they important?

Healthy trees serve many purposes in your local community. A way to ensure your trees stay healthy is by hiring an arborist. Professional, trained arborists know how to properly maintain trees for the safety of the public and the health of the tree.

What Is an ISA Certified Arborist? An ISA arborist certification is a nongovernmental, voluntary process by which individuals can document their base of knowledge. Certification provides a measurable assessment of an individual's knowledge in the competencies needed for proper tree care.

When a professional becomes an **ISA Certified Arborist**, they should be recognized by their peers and the public as a tree care professional who has attained a generally-accepted level of knowledge in areas such as tree biology, diagnosis, maintenance practices, safety, and other subject and practice areas within the tree care profession as identified through periodic job task analyses. They must also continue their education to maintain their certification. Therefore, they are more likely to be up to date on the latest techniques in arboriculture.

#### Seattle Municipal Code [15.43.050 - Tree Service Provider requirements](#)

Tree companies usually have qualified ISA certified arborists. This does not mean their conduct cutting trees is legal or appropriate. That depends on the ethics and business practices of the company. Right now, they are free to operate in the City of Seattle without any qualifications, except for companies that service street trees (trees planted in parking strips along streets). They don't have to submit paperwork to Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) to register. To the contrary, tree service companies that service street trees are required to register with the Seattle Department of Transportation.

Be careful when a tree company is hasty in trying to convince you cut down a tree on your property. There is some evidence that tree companies convince people to cut down their trees when some pruning would do the trick.



[Source](#)

[How to know if your tree service provider is legitimate](#)

[Plant Amnesty](#)

206-783-9813; [info@plantamnesty.org](mailto:info@plantamnesty.org); PO Box 15377, Seattle, WA 98115

<https://www.plantamnesty.org/services/referral-services/>

[Search by Zip code for an arborist](#)

<https://www.treesaregood.org/findanarborist>

## IV. Protect your Trees first, then plant trees

Seedlings and saplings - even many of them- are not equitable to mature trees

### The large tree argument

#### McPherson and Peper, USFS

Much of the work centering around "size matters" originates from Dr. E. Greg McPherson. Greg spent his 30+ year career as a US Forest Service Scientist. He began in Arizona then, with the influence of a Congressman, Dr. Rowan Rowntree and the Sacramento Tree Foundation, became the principal scientist for the Southwest Research Station in Davis, CA.

The long-term research from Dr. E. Greg McPherson and Paula Peper worked together for years --counting each and every needle and leaf on a conifer and broadleaves to validate "Bigger IS Better."

**A tree doesn't begin to product the expected environmental benefits until it is at least 15-20 years old. --yet another reason for preservation, rather than remove and replace (Davey Resource Company interview). We have a 10-year window to address the worst of climate change so our big trees, especially conifers, are essential protections for us.**

## V. Regulatory and Permitting Considerations

### Tree Protection and Replacement – What’s the Law?

#### [The Tree Protection Code \(law linked in the title\)](#)

Mature trees provide many more health and environmental benefits than newly planted trees. Laws in Seattle protect certain categories of mature trees from removal.

Developed property is a parcel or lot that has legally permitted structures or uses. On developed property:

- You cannot remove any exceptional trees unless they are determined to be a high-risk hazard (for more information about hazard trees, click [here](#)). Exceptional trees are trees that are above a certain size for their species and have historical, ecological, or aesthetic value (Director's Rule 16-2008, [Designation of Exceptional Trees](#))<sup>i</sup>
- You cannot cut down more than 3 non-exceptional trees 6 inches or greater in diameter each year unless the tree is designated a high-risk hazard by permit.

**In all zones, exceptional trees and trees greater than 24” in diameter at breast height (DBH— 4.5 feet above the ground) are protected from removal during development.** Anyone who removes such a tree because it is legally deemed hazardous, must replace it with a tree that will provide the same canopy coverage when it is mature. This requirement does not apply if the tree qualifies as a hazardous tree.

For more information about regulations regarding tree and vegetation removal during development, click this link:

[Codes SDCI is supposed to enforce](#)

**For other required actions to protect trees during development,** click the link below:

[Detailed Tree Code](#)

[Illegal Cutting](#)

([Seattle Municipal Code](#)): [25.11.050](#) - General Provisions for exceptional tree determination and tree protection area delineation in Single-family, Residential Small Lot, Low rise, Midrise, and Commercial zones.

## What great positive actions and outcomes are possible during development?

Some may not be aware that new and renovation construction projects also must follow large tree protection regulations, including trees on abutting neighbor property. This requirement often **begins with lot subdivisions** where one of the [criteria for approval of lot subdivision](#) is to demonstrate that the proposed lot subdivision will result in the best retention of existing significant trees... including those trees that may on an **adjacent property** near the property line of the developed lot (SMC 23.24).<sup>ii</sup> Often, SDCl has limited documentation that demonstrates a proposed lot subdivision has been evaluated to this criteria, so it is important to be sure to ask for such documentation when a public notice is issued regarding a lot to be subdivided. After the lot is divided, it may be too late to affect a development solution that allows the retention of one or more significant trees. One example may be a proposed lot subdivision that would result in a large tree being near the center of one of the proposed subdivided lots compared to a better lot subdivision that may be divided along the centerline of an existing large tree.

The next more important review for the protection of existing trees follows lot subdivision during the **Master Use Permit application and construction permit application**. At this stage, the Seattle Code<sup>iii</sup> only affords protection to larger and Exceptional Trees and Tree Groves. Of significance, the code requires that developer explore all possible alternatives or the tree may not be removed. (SMC 25.11.070A.2).

- The Architect must either modify the project so that design review departures will save the tree, or
- The Architect must proceed through an Administrative Design Review and look at permissible departures (under SMC 23.41.012) and go through community consensus gathering (under SMC 23.41.018.B.3.)

Moreover, if the development is in Low-rise Residential zone (for townhouses, row-houses, and some apartments), then the provisions (Section 25.11.070.A) apply for Exceptional Trees.

1. If the Director determines that an exceptional tree within a proposed development is not proposed to be preserved, the development shall go through streamlined design review.
2. The Director may permit the exceptional tree to be removed **only if** the total floor area that could be achieved within the maximum permitted FAR (Floor Area Ratio) and height limits of the applicable Low-rise zone according to [Title 23](#) cannot be achieved while avoiding the tree protection area through multiple alternatives as identified in the code.



The policy provided in SMC 25.05.675.N.2.c calls for protecting three categories of trees and/or vegetation where development would reduce or damage them.

Positive examples where these tree protection codes have been observed and enforced exist in these two Ballard Urban Village low-rise residential developments of multiple dwellings on a property while – at the same time – retaining at least one or more large trees.



Before

After

**2000 NW 61<sup>st</sup>  
Street and  
6105 20<sup>th</sup> Ave NW  
(Ballard)**



Before / During

2030 and 2042  
NW 62<sup>nd</sup> Street



After

32



After  
(tree 4)

2030 and  
2042  
NW 62<sup>nd</sup>  
Street

33

## VI. Potentially Illegal Tree Cutting – TAKING ACTION



### *What to do if you see a tree being cut and you think something is wrong*

Here is a link to information [about illegal tree cutting](#) in Seattle:

#### **1. Call the City**

##### ***Whom do I call during the day?***

**If the tree is on private property:** If you see what you think is a violation of [Seattle's tree code](#) on private property, please report it to the Code Compliance Division of the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) [online](#) or call the Code Compliance line at (206) 615-0808. (Open Mon, Thurs, Fri 8 am - 4:30 pm and Tues, Wed 10 am - 4:30 pm.) Code Compliance is only staffed to respond to complaints during business hours of the work week; messages will be addressed as soon as possible during business hours. The Seattle Police Department generally will not respond to suspected tree code violations. Please do this even if the trees have already been removed.

**If it's a street tree:** The [Seattle Department of Transportation \(SDOT\)](#) regulates trees in the right of way or along streets. Report concerns about street trees by calling (206) 684-TREE (8733) or emailing [seattle.trees@seattle.gov](mailto:seattle.trees@seattle.gov)

**If it's on Seattle Parks Department property:** Report to (206) 684-4113 during regular business hours (8:00 am - 4:00 pm - Monday through Friday)

##### ***Whom do I call in the evening?***

Right now, there is no one to contact in the evening except SDCI. This must change in the future.

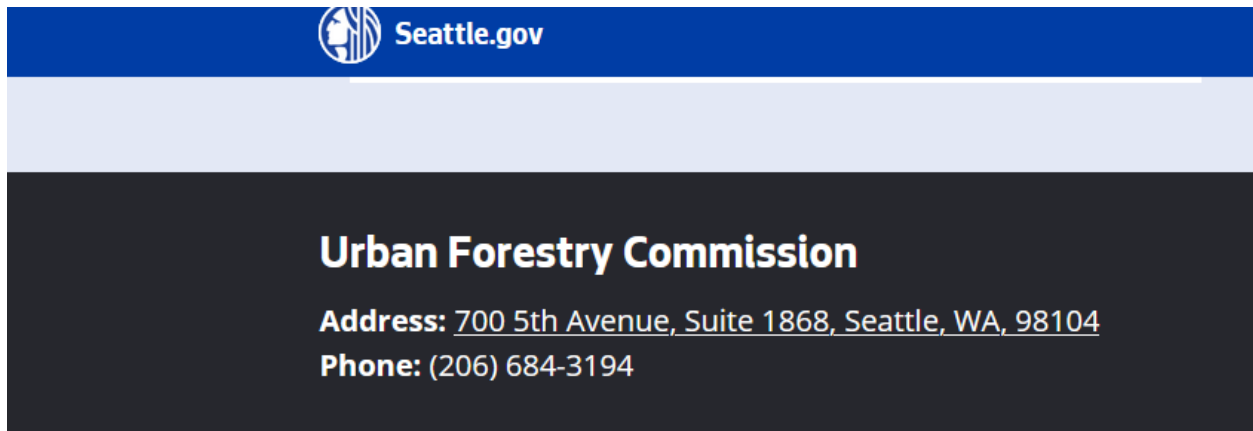
## 2. Document What's Going On—Take Photos and Videos


**Site or property address.** Code Compliance needs an address to look for a location. If it is a vacant lot or otherwise has no address, note this and provide the addresses of the lots on either side of where the violation is occurring.

**Pictures of the tree(s).** It is helpful to have something else in the picture to give the investigator an idea of the size of the tree(s). That could be something of a known common size, such as a person, a car, or house.

**Picture of tree cutting/removal company truck with company name.** Or, if no name, the license plate number and state.

## Understanding What's Happening in Seattle: Urban Forestry Commission

A screenshot of the Seattle.gov website. At the top, there is a blue header with the Seattle.gov logo and text. Below this is a light blue horizontal bar. The main content area has a dark grey background with the text "Urban Forestry Commission" in white. Below that, the address and phone number are listed in white text.

 Seattle.gov

**Urban Forestry Commission**

**Address:** [700 5th Avenue, Suite 1868, Seattle, WA, 98104](#)

**Phone:** (206) 684-3194

The City passed [Ordinance 123052](#) in August 2009 establishing Urban Forestry Commission (UFC) to advise the Mayor and City Council concerning the establishment of policy and regulations governing the protection, management, and conservation of trees and vegetation in the City of Seattle. The Ordinance was updated in 2017 to increase the membership with [Ordinance 125415](#).

Please note that our tree regulations are developed within the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) which is essentially a building department whose fees are based on construction. This is a conflict of interest with respect to tree protection and policy development.

The UFC is composed of thirteen members, six appointed by the Mayor, six appointed by City Council, and one (Position #9) is elected by the Urban Forestry Commission.

All positions serve without compensation, are confirmed by City Council, and have three-year terms after the initial round of appointments, which were staggered. Appointments can be renewed once. Position #10 (Get Engaged) has a one-year non-renewable term.

Commissioners will have knowledge in the areas specific to the position for which they are applying and a willingness to devote approximately 10 hours a month to UFC meetings and other Commission duties.

Applications are accepted on a continual basis and press releases are sent out before each series of interviews, which occur when there are vacancies.

You can attend meetings and access presentations and reports by clicking [HERE](#)

### *What about cutting off the top of a tree to gain a view?*

#### **Stop Tree Topping**



Tree topping is an outdated pruning practice that indiscriminately removes large amounts of leaves and branches. Not only does tree topping look terrible, it will cause greater and faster regrowth. Topping a tree only stimulates growth, increasing the need for subsequent work and maintenance. Tree topping also causes serious long-term damage to a tree, increasing the hazard to people and property. Certified arborists and legitimate landscape professionals will never suggest topping a tree- there are other acceptable pruning practices for keeping a tree away from adjacent structures. Avoid tree topping, and hire an ISA certified arborist.

Check out this ISA article on [Why Topping Hurts Trees](#)

## VII. Legal: Property Lines and Tree Disputes

Trees often straddle properties, with branches hanging across fence lines and root systems growing in different directions. This can cause conflict between neighbors.

[Seattle Municipal Code](#)

[Nolo Legal Encyclopedia Tree Damage](#)

[Nolo Legal Encyclopedia Tree Neighbors](#)

[Nolo Legal Encyclopedia Washington Law Property Disputes](#)

## VIII. Contact your Councilmember

### [FIND YOUR COUNCIL DISTRICT and Council member](#)

When you write your City Council member, it is best to call or/and send written letters. We hear internally that they receive too many emails and have been struggling to keep up with them

#### **What to Express (in your own words):**

- Trees are an essential part of public health, climate change and racial justice
- There are ways to develop around trees in most cases- we should be promoting a trees and people ethic and practice. Other area cities are doing the same.
- The city is permitting the cutting of between 3,000 and 4,000 trees a year- most are on private property and not parks and rights of way (ROW)
- Seedlings are not replacements for mature tree removal- they will take 20 years to grow and conifers are being replaced by dwarf deciduous trees
- Everyone needs trees for health and community well-being- we have treehouses that are essential to healthy kids and air quality
- Seattle ranks high for rates of asthma and trees clean air

***Brought to you by the People and Trees Coalition***

[treesandpeople@pacificwest.com](mailto:treesandpeople@pacificwest.com)



## End Notes and Access to Web Resources

### Take care of your trees

Planting and care: <https://www.seattle.gov/trees/planting-and-care>

Pruning: <https://www.seattle.gov/trees/planting-and-care/pruning>

[https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Trees/PlantingAndCare/Pruning/RPG\\_Tree\\_Pruning\\_Cue\\_Card.pdf](https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Trees/PlantingAndCare/Pruning/RPG_Tree_Pruning_Cue_Card.pdf)

[https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Trees/PlantingAndCare/Pruning/Pruning\\_MatureTrees.pdf](https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Trees/PlantingAndCare/Pruning/Pruning_MatureTrees.pdf)

### Tree regulations

Tree regulations in Seattle: <http://www.seattle.gov/DPD/Publications/CAM/cam242.pdf>

### Learn to take care of Trees and Hiring an Arborist

Interested in gaining some hand-on experience with the pros? [City Fruit](#), [UW Botanic Gardens](#), and [Plant Amnesty](#) all offer hands-on structural pruning courses in Seattle. Learn more by visiting their webpages and contacting them about their upcoming class schedule.



<https://www.seattle.gov/trees/planting-and-care/pruning>

**Source:**

[https://www.treesaregood.org/Portals/0/TreesAreGood\\_Why%20Hire%20An%20Arborist\\_0321.pdf](https://www.treesaregood.org/Portals/0/TreesAreGood_Why%20Hire%20An%20Arborist_0321.pdf)

**How to know if your tree service provider is legitimate**

<https://www.americanarborists.net/tree-tips/2018/may/how-to-know-if-your-tree-service-provider-is-leg/>

<https://www.seattle.gov/trees/planting-and-care/pruning>

<https://www.plantamnesty.org/services/referral-services/>

**Search by Zip code for an arborist:**

<https://www.treesaregood.org/findanarborist>

**Protect your Trees first, then plant trees- - but know that seedlings- even a lot of them- are not equivalent to mature trees**

[https://www.fs.fed.us/psw/topics/urban\\_forestry/products/cufr\\_511\\_large\\_tree\\_argument.pdf](https://www.fs.fed.us/psw/topics/urban_forestry/products/cufr_511_large_tree_argument.pdf)

[https://www.fs.fed.us/psw/publications/documents/psw\\_gtr253/psw\\_gtr\\_253.pdf](https://www.fs.fed.us/psw/publications/documents/psw_gtr253/psw_gtr_253.pdf)

**Tree Protection and Replacement – What’s the Law?**

### **The Tree Protection Code**

[https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal\\_code?nodeId=TIT25ENPRHIPR\\_CH2\\_5.11TRPR](https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal_code?nodeId=TIT25ENPRHIPR_CH2_5.11TRPR)

For more information about regulations regarding tree and vegetation removal during development, click this link:

[http://www.seattle.gov/sdci/codes/codes-we-enforce-\(a-z\)/tree-protection-code](http://www.seattle.gov/sdci/codes/codes-we-enforce-(a-z)/tree-protection-code)

**For other required actions to protect trees during development,** click the link below:

<http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/SDCI/Codes/TreeDetail.pdf>

<https://www.seattle.gov/trees/regulations/illegal-cutting>

[https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal\\_code?nodeId=TIT25ENPRHIPR\\_CH25.11TRPR\\_25.11.050GEPREXTRDETRPRARDESIMIRESMLOLOMICOZO](https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal_code?nodeId=TIT25ENPRHIPR_CH25.11TRPR_25.11.050GEPREXTRDETRPRARDESIMIRESMLOLOMICOZO)

If you observe what you think is a violation of [Seattle's tree code](#) on private property please report it to the Code Compliance Division of the Department of Construction and Inspections [online](#) or call the Code Compliance line at (206) 615-0808. (Open Mon, Thurs, Fri 8 am - 4:30 pm and Tues, Wed 10 am - 4:30 pm).

**Seattle Municipal Code prohibits tree topping [25.11.040 - Restrictions on tree removal](#)**

*Tree* removal or *topping* is prohibited most case, except as provided in Section 25.11.030, or where the *tree* removal is required for the construction.

[https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal\\_code?nodeId=TIT25ENPRHIPR\\_CH25.11TRPR\\_25.11.040RETRRE](https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal_code?nodeId=TIT25ENPRHIPR_CH25.11TRPR_25.11.040RETRRE)

## Urban Forestry Commission

You can attend meetings and access presentations and reports below:

<https://www.seattle.gov/urbanforestrycommission/meetingdocuments>

## Legal Considerations

[https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal\\_code?nodeId=TIT23LAUSCO\\_SUBTITLE\\_IIIILAUSSRE\\_CH23.44RESIMI](https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal_code?nodeId=TIT23LAUSCO_SUBTITLE_IIIILAUSSRE_CH23.44RESIMI)

<https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/neighbor-tree-damage-46933.html>

<https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/trees-neighbors-faq.html>

<https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/washington-laws-neighbor-propertdisputes-65214.html>

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<sup>i</sup> [DR 16-2008, Designation of Exceptional Trees](#); This rule interprets Building Code (Ch 22.100) SEPA Policies and Procedures (Ch. 25.05); Tree Protection (Ch. 25.11); Supersedes 6-2001. <http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/codes/dr/DR2008-16x.pdf>

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ii [23.24.040 - Criteria for approval](#) Municipal Code > [Title 23 - LAND USE CODE](#) – Lot subdivisions;

[https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal\\_code?nodeId=TIT23LAUSCO\\_SUBTITLE\\_IIPRE\\_CH23.24SHPL\\_23.24.040CRAP](https://library.municode.com/wa/seattle/codes/municipal_code?nodeId=TIT23LAUSCO_SUBTITLE_IIPRE_CH23.24SHPL_23.24.040CRAP)

iii Codes require design departures in order to retain exceptional trees and tree groves:

**23.41.012 - Development standard departures**

B. Departures may be granted from any Land Use Code standard or requirement, except for the following:

10. Floor area ratios (FAR), except that:

b. Departures of up to an additional 0.5 FAR may be granted if the applicant demonstrates that:

- 1) The departure is needed to **protect a tree** that is located on the lot that is either an exceptional tree, as defined in Section 25.11.020, or a tree greater than 2 feet in diameter measured 4.5 feet above the ground; and
- 2) Avoiding development in the tree protection area will reduce the total development capacity of the site;

**25.11.070 - Tree protection on sites undergoing development in Lowrise zones**

The provisions in this [Section 25.11.070](#) apply in Lowrise zones.

A. Exceptional trees

1. If the Director determines that an exceptional tree is located on the lot of a proposed development, which is not a major institution use within a Major Institution Overlay zone, and the tree is not proposed to be preserved, the development shall go through streamlined design review as provided in [Section 23.41.018](#) if the project falls below the thresholds for design review established in [Section 23.41.004](#).

2. The Director may permit the exceptional tree to be removed only if the total floor area that could be achieved within the maximum permitted FAR and height limits of the applicable Lowrise zone according to [Title 23](#) cannot be achieved while avoiding the tree protection area through the following:

a. Development standard adjustments permitted in [Section 23.41.018](#) or the departures permitted in [Section 23.41.012](#).

b. An increase in the permitted height as follows under subsection 25.11.070.A.3.

3. In order to preserve an exceptional tree, the following code modifications are allowed:

a. Permitted height. For a principal structure with a base height limit of 40 feet that is subject to the pitched roof provisions of subsection 23.45.514.D, the Director may permit the ridge of a pitched roof with a minimum slope of 6:12 to extend up to a height of 50 feet if the increase is needed to accommodate, on an additional story, the amount of floor area lost by avoiding development within the tree protection area and the amount of floor area on the additional story is

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limited to the amount of floor area lost by avoiding development within the tree protection area.

b. Parking reduction. A reduction in the parking quantity required by [Section 23.54.015](#) and the standards of [Section 23.54.030](#) may be permitted in order to protect an exceptional tree if the reduction would result in a project that would avoid the tree protection area.

4. If the Director determines that an exceptional tree is located within a Major Institution Overlay zone, and the tree is not proposed to be preserved, the Director may allow removal of an exceptional tree only if:

a. The proposed development is for a major institution use identified in an adopted Major Institution Master Plan; and

b. The location of an exceptional tree is such that planned future physical development identified in an adopted Major Institution Master Plan cannot be sited while avoiding the tree protection area; and

c. Mitigation for exceptional trees and trees over 2 feet in diameter, measured 4.5 feet above the ground, is provided pursuant to [Section 25.11.090](#) for trees that are removed in association with development.

B. Trees over 2 feet in diameter

1. Trees over 2 feet in diameter, measured 4.5 feet above the ground, shall be identified on site plans.

2. In order to protect trees over 2 feet in diameter, an applicant may request and the Director may allow modification of development standards in the same manner and to the same extent as provided for exceptional trees in subsection 25.11.070.A.

**SMC 25.05.675.N.2.c**

Protecting three categories of trees and/or vegetation where development would reduce or damage them:

1. Rare, uncommon, unique or exceptional plant or wildlife habitat; or

2. Wildlife travelways; or

3. Habitat diversity for species (plants or animals) of substantial aesthetic, educational, ecological or economic value.

Exceptional trees should be considered under the first and third categories listed above during environmental assessment of development applications. Other trees that have special wildlife habitat importance, such as those containing a bald eagle's nest or communal roost, also should be considered. (Directors Rule 16-2008)