



Barrell on... Tree risk is not always a numbers game

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How we assess the risk from trees matters because the consequences of getting it wrong can be both spectacular and devastating when a tree fails. Traditionally, arborists used their eyes and experience to work out what to cut off and what to leave. In retrospect, this was quite a hit and miss approach. But it worked because the risk from trees was kept very low — a legacy that we still enjoy today.

On the practical side, advances in tree technology now inform the decision-making process through thermal imaging, decay-detection drills and sonic sensing data. Theory, too, has progressed at pace, with developments in other risk-assessment sectors being applied to trees. Most notable now is the emerging popularity of quantifying risk by inserting numbers into a recipe to "bake" a safe tree management cake.

A quantified approach can be deceptively alluring, though. If it all goes wrong, there is always the excuse that the recipe was wrong, not you. Numbers also imply precision, which is intuitively more comfortable than admitting your decisions are based on guesswork. Faced with such increasingly complex options, many arborists are wondering whether they will be vulnerable if they fail to adopt more "modern" approaches.

Well, indications from the courts suggest that such anxieties may not be justified. In the case *R v T* [2010] EWCA 2439, the Court of Appeal concluded that, when calculating likelihood ratios, an approach based on mathematical calculation was only as good as the reliability of the data used. It is conceivable that this ruling could apply to quantitatively assessing tree risk — after all, putting figures to the likelihood of tree failure is nothing more than a guess, with no reliable back-up data.

More recently, a case brought against the National Trust regarding a fatality at Felbrigg Hall in Norfolk may provide some further clues. In his summing up before clearing the Trust of negligence, the judge noted that "the process of judging the integrity of a tree is an art and not a science".

When it comes to assessing the risk from trees, it seems that starting with a best guess may be okay and experience is likely to be more important than science.

