



Barrell on... Vigilance needed in tree-risk management

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The recent inquest into the death of a young woman at Kew Gardens in 2012 caused by a falling branch from a mature cedar raised important tree-risk management questions. After lengthy proceedings, a jury found that there was insufficient evidence to decide on the cause of branch failure.

However, the experts had firm opinions, with Kew attributing it to weather (wind and rain), the coroner's expert stating that the cause was something "akin to summer branch drop" and myself, in the capacity of expert for the deceased's family, confident that summer branch drop was the cause.

This has left some duty holders wondering whether summer branch drop is a significant risk and the likely extent of reasonable, proportionate and defensible precautions against it.

Summer branch drop is the term describing the failure of mature tree branches in summer, with no obvious cause. These events often occur after the onset of heavy rainfall following a prolonged dry spell.

There is speculation that this weather combination is significant, but the precise mechanism is not understood and the phenomenon is poorly researched.

There are suggestions that the risk from summer branch drop is so low that precautions are not warranted. However, emerging anecdotal evidence is indicating that it may be more common than first thought and that a proactive management approach may be justified.

It is widely accepted that old and large individuals of some species such as oak, beech, cedar and horse chestnut are more susceptible. There is also an increasing awareness that the risk is greater during specific weather conditions.

In the context of this accumulating body of knowledge, it may be prudent for duty holders responsible for vulnerable trees located in areas of high public access to be particularly vigilant, especially at the end of prolonged dry spells, over the coming months.

