

Long Island Landscape Changed Forever

By Tamsin Venn

Hurricane Sandy “was the worst storm we’ve ever seen,” says Jon Hickey Sr., general manager of 46-year TCIA member Lehman Plant Care Co. in Hicksville, New York. “No one predicted a storm of this magnitude. The urban and natural landscape of Long Island has been changed forever.”

Voids created by the storm in the natural wooded areas will alter Long Island’s



Jon Hickey with Vennie Tsadilas, his long-time office manager.

ecosystem, which has many oak forests and some heritage trees (colonists cut down the native forests), according to Hickey.

“The oak forest preserves are going to be impacted because the weed trees will grown in, and there are no public resources to deal with them because of the economics.”

Hickey thinks biomechanics will play a bigger role in the future of tree management on Long Island, as landscapers seek new solutions. “Because of the large losses, tree biomechanics will come more into play, and how the trees will react in their new location in the forest or urban location.”

For the immediate future, however, four months after Sandy, he and his crew of about a dozen workers are still hauling debris – in dumpsters. “Things have settled, but the debris is absolutely incredible,” he says.

The damage he notes had no rhyme or reason; both lawn trees and forest trees were destroyed. “You couldn’t make a comparison,” he says.

Starting Monday (Oct. 29 when Sandy hit land), Hickey’s crew started working for his regular clients. His manager at the

company’s office in Hicksville took in 100 calls the first morning. They worked overtime to clear driveways and take trees off houses, but post clean-up, four months later, is still in full swing, as tree care companies continue to remove “mounds and mounds” of debris. Post storm, long lines of trucks loaded with branches formed at the recycling centers, plus fuel ran out at gas stations. One estate lost 64 major trees. “The owner allowed us to use his fuel,” says Hickey.

As for roof damage, many Long Island houses still have blue tarps secured, resembling a typical post-hurricane Florida landscape.

In the near and long term, salt injury needs to be addressed, says Hickey. Salt spray from the wind-driven ocean damaged the east/southeast sides of the white pines on the South Shore (and in some cases even 15 miles inland) and killed many of them. Come spring, his company will advise clients on salt damage, not only to the trees but to the soil as well. Cornell Extension indicates it’s too soon to tell how much damage the white pines suffered, and how much needle drop will occur. The advice is not to fertilize now, but just try to get the salt out, says Hickey. Another concern will be harmful insects that invade damaged trees.

“We haven’t even gotten to the ornaments yet,” he adds. Those got another wallop about a week later when winter storm Athena blew through. Many can’t be replaced.

Early in the storm, Hickey contacted landscape architects to advise them to secure the premier trees for their clients.

Another issue, Hickey notes, is dendrophobia, or fear of trees. After storms, clients want the tree companies to cut down their trees to avoid future damage. “I tell them they’ve got to rethink this,” says Hickey, who has been in the tree business for more than 60 years.

One client asked him to cut down a beautiful old white oak whose value Hickey determined was far greater than the risk. “It was really a mortal sin to take that tree down.” He refused and lost the account. “That tree lost its life because of dendrophobia,” he says.

One of the major, and most regrettable issues, of post storm damage cleanup is what the Lehman Plant Care Company GM refers to as the “storm chasers,” tree companies that come in after a storm and



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“exploit people, and leave the property in worse shape than when they started.”

“We and many other reputable companies do the job A to Z, clean up the property afterward. The storm chaser takes the debris and leave it out on the street for the taxpayers to clean up. That’s a rip off. FEMA picked up a lot of debris from private homes,” he adds.

Sightings of trucks with license plates from such far-away states as Michigan were common. Some were legitimate, but some were not, according to Hickey.

“I’ve been a TCIA member for almost 50 years. The workers on Long Island are required to have at least 15 licenses. The tree workers who come in don’t have to have them, they get a free pass. Some of them have no insurance, they don’t follow ANSI standards. They’re not trying to preserve the trees. We play by the rules, they don’t.”

Hickey likes to quote the late arborist and TCIA member Freeman L. Parr who once noted that a major storm leads to a rebirth of tree companies that then fade away. “There’s a lot more to it than people think,” says Hickey.

Hickey himself had no power for 13 days. One of his colleagues lost his house and all his equipment. Ultimately, the overriding impact Sandy had was the human cost, according to Hickey, who says he has seen many storms in his career. To his way of thinking, Sandy was a career changer.

For one, people get very attached to their trees (the non dendrophobiasts), and some “will never live to see these trees grow back,” he says. Impact on real estate values is another concern. “There was a lot of pain and suffering. People lost their homes. It affected us not just in terms of business, but in a very human way.”