

Headline	Regular checks vital in tackling tree failure		
MediaTitle	The Sunday Post (Kuching)		
Date	07 Jul 2024	Color	Full Color
Section	Home	Circulation	65,012
Page No	10	Readership	195,036
Language	English	ArticleSize	568 cm ²
Journalist	Soon Li Wei	AdValue	RM 7,745
Frequency	Daily (EM)	PR Value	RM 23,235



Regular checks vital in tackling tree failure

By **Soon Li Wei**

KUALA LUMPUR: Siti Nur Masyitah Razali sometimes takes public transport to go to her workplace at Jalan Imbi here from Setiawangsa where she stays.

The monorail station is located just 500m from her office but the presence of trees along the route is making the 42-year-old human resource executive anxious, given the reports of trees or branches falling around the capital city during bad weather.

On May 7, a man was killed and another person injured after an uprooted tree fell on their car at Jalan Sultan Ismail here.

Heavy rain and strong winds since January have led to the Fire and Rescue Department of Malaysia (Bomba) recording 1,085 incidents of fallen trees nationwide in the first four months of this year.

In 2021, the Civil Defence Force recorded 3,081 such cases and the following year 3,358 cases.

Last year, a total of 4,825 cases of falling trees or branches were recorded, resulting in 10 fatalities and injuries to 47 people.

"The trees along the roads look beautiful and help to keep the city cooler. But if not properly managed, the safety of the public, infrastructure and surrounding buildings will be at risk, especially with the unpredictable weather these days due to climate change.

"Rapid development has also led to many trees that shouldn't be cut down being felled, while some that should be removed are left intact without proper monitoring," Siti Nur Masyitah told Bernama.

On June 27, Minister in Prime Minister's Department (Federal Territories) Dr Zaliha Mustafa said Kuala Lumpur City Hall had felled 173 high-risk trees since 2019.

However, experts caution that this does not guarantee incidents of fallen trees will not occur in the future, given the rapid development taking place nationwide driven by the steadily increasing population each year.

Malaysia Society of Arborist president Mohd Zailani Jamil

says it is necessary to conduct regular inspections and implement mitigation measures to minimise the risk of tree failure in cities.

In definition, tree failure refers to a structural deterioration or breakage of any part of a tree, including the roots, trunk or canopy branches.

"It is imperative that the authorities and relevant stakeholders prioritise the implementation of comprehensive inspection and maintenance programmes to ensure the safety of trees in urban areas," he told Bernama.

He also said the recent incidents of fallen trees served as a reminder to consider the importance of tree roots when developing the surrounding areas.

"Tree roots are the primary contributors to tree stability and any disturbance to the roots or cutting them off can lead to decay, compromising the structural integrity of the tree.

"Therefore, urban development plans must integrate measures to protect and preserve tree roots to maintain the stability of trees in

the long term," he said.

Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) Forestry and Environment Division arborist Abdul Hayat Mat Saad, meanwhile, opined that the public must have some basic knowledge about the health of trees, especially those planted in urban areas, so that they could inform the local authorities should they come across unhealthy trees; thus, ensuring public safety.

He said the public could use the visual tree assessment method to assess the health of trees.

"It has three stages. The first stage is observing the physical condition of trees from a distance, to identify those at risk of falling, or those that are unhealthy.

"The second stage involves walking around the tree 360 degrees to closely observe the condition of the soil surrounding the tree and its trunk, leaves and roots. If mushrooms are growing

around the base of the trunk or there are large 'wounds' on the trunk, it indicates internal decay.

"At this point, we move to the third stage, that is, 'advanced assessment', which can only be conducted by certified arborists using specific tools," he said.

He said not all unhealthy-looking trees needed to be completely felled, pointing out that some would only require

their branches to be trimmed, while the wounds on certain trees could be left to heal on their own.

"Trees, much like humans, can show signs of 'illness' if they are stressed by their surroundings. These signs need to be treated to prevent a tree from falling," he said.

Abdul Hayat also advised the public never to nail banners or

advertisement boards on trees.

"If the nails are not properly removed and are left behind after the banners or advertisements are taken down, it will accelerate the tree's decay, deteriorating its health and increasing the risk of it falling," he said.

According to biodiversity consultant Surin Sukswan, the recent incidents involving tree failure in Kuala Lumpur were largely due to development pressure, exacerbated by climate change which has affected mature, old and large trees.

"I think the problem lies in urban planning and expansion because we are very car-dependent, which leads to continuous expansion of roads.

"When roads are expanded, the roots of old trees often get damaged or are chopped off, which may cause the trees to become less stable. When this happens, roads and sidewalks will not be as stable as before, which pose a danger to pedestrians," he said.

Climate change and the resulting heavier-than-usual rainfall, as well as infrastructure development and building construction works, had heightened the risk of damage and injury posed by old trees, he added.

Surin also said it was important to have good arborists in every local council to ensure urban trees are well-maintained.

"Planting the right trees in the right places is crucial. It is important to implement proper tree trimming methods to prevent small branches from

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falling and damaging public property during bad weather," he added.

Recently, Housing and Local Government Minister Nga Kor Ming was quoted by the media as saying that Malaysia had a shortage of certified arborists or 'tree doctors'.

According to Mohd Zailani, who is also a certified arborist, Malaysia currently has about 150 arborists certified by the International Society of Arboriculture, compared to around 400 in Singapore.

He said in several developed countries, only certified arborists would be allowed to handle public trees to ensure proper mitigation measures would be taken to prevent tree failure.

— Bernama



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An expert says it is necessary to conduct regular inspections and implement mitigation measures to minimise the risk of tree failure in cities. — Bernama photos



Abdul Hayat delivering a briefing on tree management during a recent programme at the FRIM.



It is important to have good arborists in every local council to ensure that urban trees are well-maintained, says an expert.