

# DETECTIVE DENDRO THE DIAGNOSTIC SLEUTH

By Morus Spillane



## The Case of the Lascivious Lianas

It was a clear, wintry day, perfect for our second annual inspection and root pruning of the large southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) first described in *The Case of the Gratified Grandiflora* (solved in the April 2005 issue of this magazine).

As Codit unpacked our pouch of chisels, I surveyed the crown. It was in excellent shape—no further dieback since

the cleaning it got that first day, despite having girdling roots up to five inches wide cut away from the trunk. Codit tripped on the mulch and dropped the tool bag as he looked around the corner.

“Hey, it’s Electra Cline,” Codit said. “She’s talking to a lady in a black coat and a guy with a little magnolia next to the street and under the wires.”

It was our client, Ms. DuBois, examining the leaves as Electra untied the branches. I gave her a wave as Codit marched up to Electra.

“Hey, Electra, are you here to move that magnolia away from the wires? Someone planted the right tree in the wrong place, huh?”

“No way, Codit,” Electra smiled back. “This is the cultivar ‘Little Gem’; it tops out at 20 feet. Ashley Green in the Urban Forestry Department approved it. The species *grandiflora* gets pretty big, but we deal with them when we have to because they tolerate reduction pruning better than the trees down the street.” She pointed to a long row of red maples recently planted under the wires. “Those poor things will need pruning every few years, many hours of work and hundreds of cuts over their lifetime. All pruning is wounding, and worse yet, they are prone to decay.”

“Pest pressure is also high because there are so many of that one species,”

I added. I looked to see whether Codit was paying attention. He was back in the DuBois yard, pruners in hand, looking at a vine growing on a pine tree.

“Codit, what are you doing?”

Codit dropped the hand pruners. “Just looking, Dendro,” he protested, his cheeks as red as the holly berries on the lapel of Ms. DuBois’s coat as she and Electra approached. “I know some vines strangle trees, but since my new book says that arboriculture is the integrated management of landscape trees, shrubs—like those wax-myrtles we worked on—, and vines, I was checking to see if it was a weed.”

“No cut without a reason; you got it,” Electra smiled. “Vines can be vile or valuable, according to the observer’s view. That is *Campsis radicans*, trumpet creeper, and the next tree has *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*, Virginia creeper. They are clinging vines, not twiners like *Wisteria floribunda* and *Lonicera japonica*, which strangle the trees that support them.”

Ms. DuBois glowed. “I’m so glad you know that, young lady. Mr. Dendro included the vines in his original landscape inventory. He knows that my favorite color is red. The first vine has red flowers and the second has red leaves. I also love the way they form a natural area as they creep along the ground.”

Codit stashed the hand pruners back in his holster as he went back to the front yard.

After we finished pruning and fertilizing the roots, I stepped into the foyer to give her the invoice. Idly rubbing the newly polished leaves on her ficus plant while she wrote the check, I saw a pot-bellied brass Buddha smiling up at me from his seat at the base of the tree. I smiled back.

“Mr. Dendro, the magnolia looks grand!” she said as she handed me the check. “My late husband planted that tree after he came home from the war, and it means so much to me that it will last. You were



**Creeping vines cling to their supporting trees without twining. The tree is not strangled, though pruning is needed to keep the vine from smothering the tree.**

TED BODNER, SOUTHERN WEED SCIENCE SOCIETY, WWW.FORESTRIMAGES.ORG

## Dendro Detective (continued)

also thoughtful to think of my love for the color red. I would like to hire your team for another project, on my estate in Hawaii. Of course I will pay your expenses, if you can work it into your schedule.”

She didn't have to ask us twice—when I told Codit, he pinched his arm to be sure he was not dreaming and got a nasty bruise.

Electra had some vacation time built up, so the next week the four of us were on a plane to Honolulu. Women in long skirts hung leis with fragrant purple and white and red flowers around our necks. I started to feel warm, and it wasn't just the temperature. We loaded our luggage and gear into the van driven by her estate's caretaker, a friendly old fellow who introduced himself as Rumi Nations. When Rumi saw our leis, his brown face went pale.

“Ms. DuBois, do you remember that red jade vine you planted on a pole near the banyan tree when you bought the estate?” he asked as he swerved up the road winding into the rainforest. “Well, I sprained my ankle on a banyan root while pruning it and took a few days at the beach to recover. When I got back I could see that it had gotten away from me and started to smother the lower branches. I took off what I could reach, but . . . strange things are happening. I think your tree team should have a look at it tomorrow.”

Electra enjoyed papaya slices for breakfast. I had mango-onion salsa on my toast, while Codit shook cinnamon and nutmeg powder on his oatmeal.

“Much of our food is harvested from trees growing on the estate,” Ms. DuBois said. “But my favorite tree is that great banyan, or *Ficus macrocarpa*, as it's more formally known.”

As we hiked up the winding path to the banyan tree, Rumi pointed out the papaya, mango, cinnamon, and nutmeg trees. We reached the banyan and looked up in awe. A giant vine with red flowers was snaking around every branch of that enormous tree. Electra and Codit donned protective gear and gloves and ascended to the top. They started ripping out the subtropical strangler while Rumi pulled me over to a sprout on a low branch he had cleared earlier.

“Mr. Dendro, you are renowned on the mainland for your arboricultural acumen, as well as your love for onions. If you can answer seven questions for me, you will be my guest at the Onion Festival in Maui next month. They have an onion-eating contest that you might enjoy participating in.”

I whipped out my waterproof pad and licked the tip of my pen.

“First, please tell me how these young leaves can live without any chlorophyll to make food using sunlight. Second, what advantage can there be for this plant to have leaves that do not produce? Third, this is an upright, epicormic shoot sometimes known as a watersprout. Should I prune it off? Fourth, what causes these bumps on the leaves, and what should be done about them?”

Rumi saw me writing quickly and looked concerned. Maybe he wasn't really planning on paying my way to Maui.

“Fifth, under which species of this tree genus was a religion founded? And finally, how many stages of Awakening are there, according to this faith, and what is its central dogma? You have as much time as your companions take to remove the vines from this tree.”

Can Dendro solve this complex case in time to earn his way to Maui? Turn to page 56 to find out.



**Aerial roots on banyan trees form butterses—and an inviting place to sit.**

RANDY CVR, GREENTREE TECHNOLOGIES, WWW.FORESTRIMAGES.ORG



**Figure 6. Limb walking with maximum stretching—with the diaphragm free.**



**Figure 7. Limb walking with maximum stretching—but with the diaphragm blocked.**

## Possible Solutions

There are many techniques—among others, stretching, yoga, qigong, tai chi chuan, and the Zilgrei, Alexander, Mézièr, and Feldenkrais methods—that enable us to acquire and maintain structural elasticity and flexibility. With the assistance of a doctor or another professional in the field of medicine, we can choose the technique that suits us best.

Moreover, we should value the expertise of those who teach such techniques and keep in mind that attention and respect to our bodies are essential.

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## WHAT'S THE DIAGNOSIS?

I finished writing and smiled. “No need to wait for them to finish, Rumi. I’m already all ready. Young leaves live off stored energy until they make their own. The plant does not send chlorophyll and other nutrients to the leaf until it thickens its cuticle to resist herbivory. Watersprouts and other epicormic shoots should not be removed if they can become permanent branches. Some that are too crowded to reach the outer canopy should be reduced and left as temporary or permanent side branches, a process known as subordination. The bumps are from thrips, insects that distort the leaves. They can be left alone, because I also see the exotic anthocorid insect *Montandoniola moraguesi*, which was brought in from Asia to kill the pest. It’s also established on the banyans in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where Codit and I will be hearing the buzz about lightning next month.”

“Your reputation did not exaggerate your skill,” Rumi said. “But like many exotic introductions, that biocontrol is now itself a pest, interfering with the balance of our native ecosystem. Now, can you answer the final . . . Watch those birds!”

He blew a wooden whistle to scatter a flock of cockatoos that were dive-bombing Electra and Codit’s ropes. What a place—flowers everywhere, lascivious lianas, kamikaze cockatoos, and a cosmic caretaker. I had to refocus—I could smell those onions already.

“Buddhism was founded under the bo tree, which was aptly named *Ficus religiosa*. There are six stages of Awakening—it delights me to see Codit navigate these—and, as it is in arboriculture, the central dogma of Buddhism is that all dogma is useless.” I winked at Rumi, and he shrugged in reply.

“You have met the challenge, so you will be our guest at the Maui Onion Festival. Please return often to our island,” he added with a bow. “There are many fascinating trees for us to learn from here.”

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*Morus Spillane is the great-nephew of pulp fiction legend Mickey Spillane. Morus follows his great-uncle’s tradition of a hard-boiled hero; his Detective Dendro’s quest is for Truth, Justice, and the Arboricultural Way. Morus got his training from touching trees and a close reading of ISA publications over the years. If you have comments, Editor Peggy Currid (pcurrid@isa-arbor.com) will forward them to Mr. Spillane.*