

Electric lines and trees share a silent tension that becomes visible only when branches sag into conductors, a storm rips through a neighborhood, or a large limb threatens a transformer. Knowing who does what when a tree is close to power infrastructure matters for safety, liability, and keeping the lights on. This article breaks down the practical roles of utilities, property owners, and licensed tree services, and offers a hands-on safety and decision guide for homeowners and managers facing trees near power lines, foundations, and in emergency situations.

Why this matters Power outages and electrical hazards are not abstract risks. A single contact between a live conductor and a tree limb can produce a flash, burn lines, start a fire, or energize nearby metal. Rapid response is essential after storm damage, but so is the right chain of authority. Acting without knowing who is responsible can create legal trouble, void insurance coverage, or, worse, put workers and bystanders in danger.

Who owns what, and why that determines responsibility Most disputes begin with a straightforward question: whose tree, whose line? Responsibilities split along ownership of the asset and the type of hazard.

- Distribution lines in the public right of way or on utility poles are maintained by the utility company. They have both the legal authority and the obligation to clear vegetation that threatens those lines.
- Trees entirely on private property are usually owned by the property owner, even if their limbs extend toward a neighbor's line or the street. Owners are typically responsible for maintaining them to avoid creating a hazard.
- Municipal or county trees, planted in park strips or on the public right of way, are often the responsibility of the city or county public works or urban forestry department.
- Where conflicts arise, such as a tree that straddles a property line, local ordinances, utility easements, and sometimes case law determine who pays and who directs the work.

Practical example: a maple whose crown intrudes on a service drop I once worked with a homeowner whose healthy maple leaned so its top brushed the overhead service drop that ran from the pole to the house. The utility dispatched a crew to trim back the branch because the drop is their responsibility up to the connection point at the house. The homeowner still paid for a portion of the pruning because local code said trees on private property must be maintained to prevent interference. That split responsibility is common: utilities secure the line; owners often pay for aesthetic or noncritical pruning.

How utilities approach vegetation management Utilities take a risk-based approach. High-voltage transmission corridors receive aggressive, scheduled clearance regimes because a failure there affects thousands. Distribution networks have inspection cycles that prioritize areas with dense vegetation, known historical faults, or high public risk.

Typical utility actions include regular inspections, pruning to industry standards, removal of dead or diseased trees threatening lines, and emergency response after storms. Utilities also enforce clearance standards around transformers and substations. Many companies maintain contracts with certified arborists and tree crews, but they also do directional pruning themselves when the risk and access permit.

When utilities will and will not remove trees Utilities will remove or prune trees that present an imminent hazard to the line they own. They will not normally remove a healthy tree simply because its canopy is visible from a line if it does not threaten reliability or safety. If a tree is on private land and the utility must cut it for clearance, most utilities will notify the owner and, in some regions, compensate or require a permit when removing significant trees. Policies vary by state and by company.

Safety first: why you should never prune near live lines yourself This point cannot be overstated. Contact with even low-voltage lines can be fatal, and electricity can arc through surprisingly long distances. Property owners

should never attempt any trimming within the safety zone around overhead conductors. Call the utility first. If a tree service proposes to work within the proximity of a live line, confirm they coordinate with the utility and that crews are trained to work near energized equipment or that the utility will de-energize the line.

**Emergency tree removal and storm response** After a storm, speed matters but so does coordination. Utilities prioritize restoration of power and will clear major obstructions from main feeders and circuits first, working outward to neighborhoods. A downed tree that has energized a home service or is blocking a primary feeder will typically be handled directly by the utility.

When a tree has fallen across private property but is not entangled with utility infrastructure, removal is the owner's responsibility. If the tree has struck a line or pole, call the utility emergency number first and keep everyone away. Keep in mind that clearing debris without addressing electrified hazards can be deadly. In the immediate aftermath of severe weather, expect delays — crews triage the most critical hazards and public safety needs first.

Permits, easements, and the fine print Utilities generally operate within easements that grant them rights to access and maintain lines on private property. That easement often allows the utility to trim or remove vegetation that interferes with the easement's purpose. However, local tree protection ordinances and historic district rules can add layers of regulation. Large removals frequently require a permit, and some municipalities require notification or approval before a utility removes street trees.

If your property has a recorded easement, read it before taking action. The easement will usually state what the utility can do and whether the property owner must be compensated for tree loss. If you are planning a major pruning or removal of trees near a public right of way, check with the city arborist or code enforcement so you do not violate local rules.

**Hiring a tree service near power lines: what to verify** When you need a contractor, due diligence matters. A few key checks tell you whether a crew is qualified to work around utilities and complex hazards.

- Ensure the company holds proper insurance, including general liability and workers compensation, and confirm limits are adequate for the scope of work.
- Verify that the crew has licenses required by your state or municipality and ask for proof of arborist certification if the work is complex.
- Confirm they have experience coordinating with utilities and a safe plan for proximity work, including de-energizing lines if necessary.
- Ask for a written estimate that explicitly states who is responsible for contacting the utility and who will obtain permits.
- Check references and recent project photos for similar work near lines or on confined sites.

A short checklist you can print or save

- Call your utility's non-emergency or emergency number before any work near lines.
- Do not touch or attempt to move trees interacting with live lines.
- Ask the utility whether they will perform the trimming or require coordination.
- Hire a licensed tree service with insurance and line-clearance experience.
- Get required permits and document all communication.

**Insurance, liability, and who pays** Liability depends on ownership and negligence. If a tree on your property damages a neighbor's line or falls on a neighboring house, homeowners insurance typically covers damage, but you could be held responsible if you ignored known hazards. Conversely, if a utility made a decision that led to

damage, the utility could be liable. Disputes often end up involving claims adjusters, and sometimes require legal advice.

For property owners, keeping records helps. Photographs of the tree's condition, maintenance logs, quotes and invoices for pruning, and correspondence with the utility all reduce uncertainty if a claim arises. For utilities, clear notice to property owners is part of risk management, as are public education programs that explain rights and responsibilities.

**Tree removal near foundations and other structures** Roots can pose threats to foundations, sidewalks, and septic systems. When the tree in question is near the house and near power lines, the complexity rises. Removing a large tree close to a foundation requires a crew that can drop sections of trunk and limb safely, often with rigging and cranes. If the tree is near a service line, the utility must either make the line safe or coordinate an approach where sections are removed without energizing conductors.

**One practical trade-off: removal versus selective pruning** Removing a tree eliminates future risk and the need for ongoing maintenance, but it also removes shade, habitat, and landscape value. Selective pruning preserves structure while reducing line contact, but it must be repeated on a schedule and can leave the tree less stable if overcut. The best choice depends on species, age, health, proximity to lines, and the homeowner's goals. Ask the arborist for an assessment that includes a two- to five-year maintenance plan and a cost comparison.

**Wood chipping, debris removal, and storm clean-up logistics** How debris is handled often determines the total cost and disruption. Utilities remove what blocks public infrastructure and sometimes chip or haul debris from the public right of way. On private property, homeowners typically pay for removal or chipping services. If you have large volumes of brush, a chipper service can reduce cubic yards significantly: a full pickup load of whole brush might reduce to a few cubic yards of chips, depending on species and moisture.

If you plan to keep chips for mulch, let them age for several months; fresh chips draw nitrogen as they decompose and can stress plants. If you want brush removed and hauled, get an explicit price for hauling per cubic yard or per truckload. After storms, demand surges, and lead times for removal can extend to days or weeks.

**Equipment and safety standards** tree services should use near power lines Line-clearance work requires specialized training and equipment: insulated tools, hot sticks, aerial lifts rated for proximity work, bucket trucks with non-conductive booms in certain circumstances, fall protection, and personal protective equipment rated for electrical hazards. Crews should follow ANSI A300 and the tree care industry association standards for pruning near power lines, and utility line crews must follow national electrical safety codes and regional regulations.

Ask your contractor about the specific equipment they will use, and ask the utility how they handle de-energizing or insulating conductors for pruning. A competent crew will outline a safety plan and a sequence of operations before starting.

**Edge cases and judgment calls** Not every situation fits a rule. Consider a large, historic tree that intrudes over a low-voltage service to a house at a critical access point. Removing it might cost tens of thousands and provoke neighborhood opposition. A middle path might be targeted crown reduction to reduce the risk profile, combined with regular inspections and a contingency fund for more aggressive work later. Conversely, a diseased ash within a few feet of a main feeder requires prompt removal even if the tree has sentimental value.

Another common dilemma is when a neighbor refuses to trim a boundary tree that threatens a shared line. Mediation through a homeowners association or local code enforcement can help. Consulting an arborist, documenting the hazard, and involving the utility early often resolve disputes before they escalate.

A pragmatic workflow for homeowners facing a tree near a power line First, identify ownership of the line. If it is a primary <https://treeservicesbatonrouge.com/blog/tree-removal-cost> or distribution line in the public right of way, call the utility. If the tree has fallen on or is entangled with a line, call immediately and stay away. If the tree is on your property and not touching wires, document its condition and consult a licensed arborist for a risk assessment. If a contractor is needed, get written estimates, confirm insurance and experience with line-clearance work, and verify who will contact the utility and obtain permits.

Final thoughts on balancing safety, cost, and landscape values Trees are valuable, but safety takes precedence when they interact with electric infrastructure. Utilities have obligations to protect the grid, but homeowners retain responsibilities to maintain their trees and properties in ways that do not create hazards. Cooperation, clear communication, and early action reduce costs and prevent accidents. When in doubt, call the utility, hire qualified professionals, and document every step. Doing so protects people, reduces liability, and preserves the parts of the landscape that are worth keeping.

Further reading and resources To make an informed decision, consult your local utility's vegetation management webpage, the municipal code regarding trees and easements, and a certified arborist for species-specific advice and hazard assessments. Utility safety hotlines and city urban forestry departments often provide free guidance for homeowners, and during storms utilities will publish restoration priorities and safety notices that clarify who will handle particular hazards.