

The Ethics of Arboriculture

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As many Florida arborists are aware, a new Florida law was recently adopted that alters local governments' ability to control tree removal and pruning on residential property in Florida. The new Florida law ([CHAPTER 2019-155, 163.045, F.S.](#)) now restricts local governments from requiring a permit or mitigation for pruning or removal of a tree on residential property, provided that the property owner obtains documentation from an ISA Certified Arborist® that the tree presents a danger to people or property.

This is a significant acknowledgement and trust that the Florida Legislature and Governor has placed on our segment (ISA Certified Arborists®) of the tree care industry. And it has the potential to be transformative for ISA Certified Arborists®. The success of this transformation is now up to us to earn. Will we rise to this occasion and act professionally, or will avarice permit us to compromise our ethics and behave unprofessionally? Only time will tell.

So, what does it mean to act “professionally” as an arborist, and who decides if we have done so? There are many aspects to being a professional, including honesty, integrity, fairness, fiduciary, objectivity, confidentiality, ethical conduct, dignity, courtesy, competence through continuing education and diligence, etc. Below are a few definitions for key ethical aspects important to our industry and this law.

- **Competence** - Competence means obtaining and maintaining a high level of knowledge and skill and to apply that knowledge and skill for a client's benefit. Competence also requires knowing when to refer a client to others because the specific knowledge necessary to accomplish the task is beyond your level of expertise. This is often the hardest professional aspect to live up to and recognize. Remember the ISA Certified Arborist® credential is a very broad credential, in that it examines your knowledge in many aspects of arboriculture, including the topic addressed in this law, ‘risk assessment’, but it does so at a fundamental level. Just because you passed a fundamental exam does not mean that you only possess fundamental knowledge. You likely know much more about some aspects of arboriculture and less about others. One of them may be risk assessment. Only you know, and only you can decide whether you have the knowledge necessary to provide this service. Fortunately, if you lack risk assessment expertise, ISA offers a more advanced qualification, the Tree Risk Assessment Qualification (TRAQ), that you can earn. TRAQ will not only teach this topic at a higher level, it will provide you a credential that will attest to your higher-level risk assessment knowledge base.
- **Integrity** - Integrity requires honesty which can never be subordinated to personal gain or advantage. Professionals distinguish themselves by providing their clients what they need and not necessarily what they want. There will always be people, not many thankfully, that have unreasonable fears of trees. Your objective as a professional arborist is to find a solution to reduce (not eliminate) risk posed by a tree to a level of risk that is acceptable to the tree owner. There will always be people for whom ‘low risk’ (our lowest rating in the Tree Risk BMP) is not low enough and will insist on the removal of the tree. What you do in this situation will be the deciding factor for our acceptance as

professionals or as the ‘tree cutters’ from whom we have worked so hard to distinguish ourselves. If we acquiesce to giving our clients what they want versus what they need we will not have earned the distinction to call ourselves professionals.

- **Fairness** - Fairness is the subordination of one’s own feelings and desires. It requires impartiality and intellectual honesty.
- **Confidentiality** – Confidentiality is your duty as a professional to protect all client information. A relationship of trust is built on the confidence that a client’s information will remain confidential. The documentation that the new Florida law requires should be given only to your client. Only your client can decide who should have access to the information.

So, who decides if our segment of the tree industry (ISA Certified Arborists®) has achieved a successful level of following professional standards to be deemed a professional group? In truth we all do. There is no formal process for such things, there is only a social process whereby society generally agrees that an industry or industry segment is deserving of such a distinction. By putting ethics first when following this law, ISA Certified Arborists® will ultimately rise to the occasion and be deemed a professional group worthy of the respect the Florida Legislature and Governor has given them.

Violations

It is the Florida Chapter ISA’s intent to assist our credential holders and the public to vigorously pursue violations of both arboricultural standards and trademark infractions. To accomplish this, we will need the cooperation of ISA Certified Arborists® and the public to report violations. Press releases will be sent out state-wide to ask residents to be aware and report arborists claiming to be ISA certified but are not listed on our web site. Self-policing by credential holders is also an important component of assuring professional compliance. ISA International maintains tools to facilitate reporting and processing both trademark and standards violations. Use these links to learn how to report violations: [Ethics violations process](#), and [trademark violations process, trademark reporting application](#).

Standards Compliance

Remember too, that as an ISA Certified Arborist you signed and agreed to follow a [Code of Ethics](#) that guides your conduct as a professional practicing arborist. The ISA Code specifically states: “It is meant to define our organization’s mission, values and principles, linking them with principles of professional conduct and industry standards. The Code of Ethics is an important communication tool with customers. It also helps maintain consistency around the world and create an even playing field for all ISA Certified Arborists®. The Code of Ethics policy is part of the application process for all incoming applicants. This effort will reduce poor professional conduct and practices because ISA Certified Arborists® will be held accountable for their actions and in turn will improve their business relations within their community and among their peers.”

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