Root Bridging Under Driveways

Protecting Trees and Infrastructure Through Advanced Arboriculture

Matt Latham

ISA Board Certified Master Arborist

THE PROBLEM: TREES VS HARDSCAPE

Conflicts between mature trees and hardscape are a ubiquitous challenge in urban environments. Sidewalks crack, driveways lift, and infrastructure integrity is compromised.

Traditional responses often prioritize concrete over canopy, leading to a lose-lose scenario for property owners and the environment.

THE FAILED DEFAULT: CUTTING ROOTS

- **Temporary Fix:** Solving the concrete problem only for a short duration.
- **Biological Decline:** Starving the tree of water and essential nutrients.
- **Failure Risk:** Increasing the likelihood of hazardous tree failure years later.
- **Instability:** Removing structural anchors that maintain the tree's upright position.

LONG-TERM RISKS OF ROOT REMOVAL

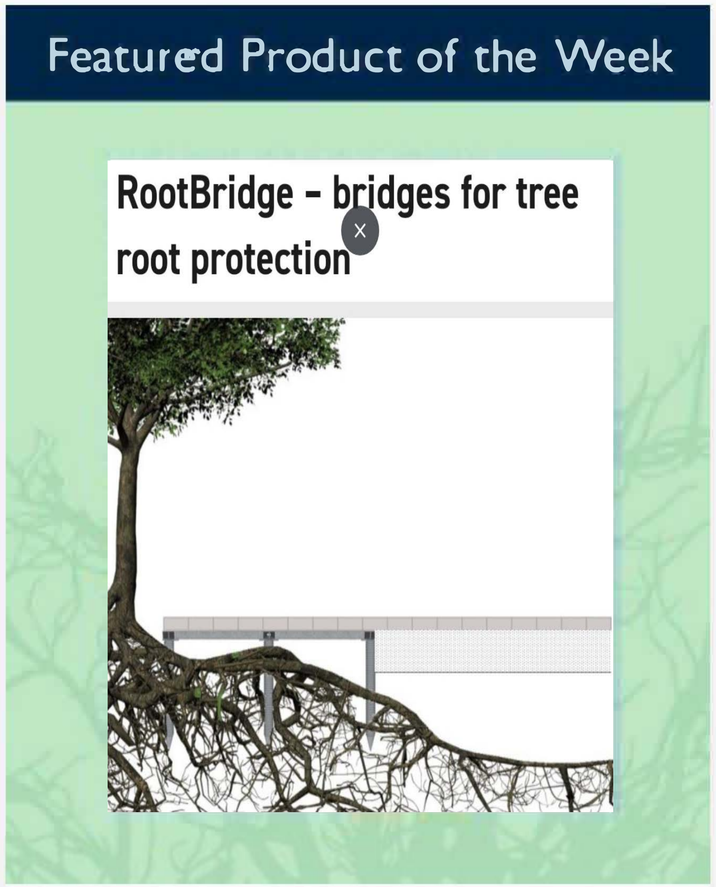
Cutting structural roots rarely ends well. It introduces systemic risks that may not manifest for several seasons but result in catastrophic failure during storm events.

The goal of modern arboriculture is to find solutions that preserve critical biological infrastructure while maintaining modern hardscapes.

The Paradigm Shift

Preservation is Not Only Possible; It is Research-Backed

THE COSTELLO & JONES FOUNDATION



A Proven Academic Framework

In 2003, L.R. Costello and K.S. Jones published *"Reducing Infrastructure Damage by Tree Roots: A Compendium of Strategies."*

This research provides the professional reference for root bridging—a technique designed to allow structural root expansion without destroying slabs.

INFRASTRUCTURE DAMAGE MITIGATION

Research-Based

Techniques documented and tested in professional arborist references.

Root Preservation

Keeps the root alive and structurally functional throughout its life.

Structural Protection

Ensures driveways and sidewalks remain level and safe for use.

TREE BIOLOGY: RADIAL EXPANSION

Growth Mechanisms

Roots grow where oxygen and moisture allow. When constrained by concrete, diameter expansion over time applies immense vertical pressure.

The Result

This pressure displaces and cracks slabs. Root bridging works by redirecting this growth rather than fighting it head-on.

THE POWER OF ROOT PRESSURE

16,000

LBS OF VERTICAL PRESSURE

Unstoppable Expansion

Studies show that expanding structural roots can generate up to 16,000 lbs of pressure. This is more than enough to uplift residential driveways and city sidewalks.

$$F = P \times A$$

The Mechanics

Implementing Root Bridging Systems

THE STEEL PLATE BRIDGING ETHOD

Steel plates are installed above (and sometimes below) large roots. This configuration restricts upward radial expansion while allowing the root to continue functioning.

The system flattens the growth response, spreading the pressure laterally rather than vertically.

FLATTENING THE GROWTH RESPONSE

Growth Restriction

Steel plates limit the "hump" formation in the root structure.

Lateral Expansion

Encourages roots to grow wide rather than tall under slabs.

Functional Life

Preserves the structure of the driveway for as long as possible.

HEALTH AND SAFETY PRIORITIES

- ✓ **Structural Anchoring:** Maintaining the tree's center of gravity.
- ✓ **Hydration Paths:** Ensuring water continues to flow to the canopy.
- ✓ **Stability Protection:** Critical for heritage and sensitive specimens.
- ✓ **Risk Mitigation:** Avoiding hazardous instability near homes.

CASE STUDY: RESIDENTIAL DRIVEWAY

A property owner required a driveway repour due to severe root damage from a neighboring tree. One primary root exceeded 6 inches in diameter.

Root removal would have created long-term instability. Bridging was implemented as the defensible alternative.

THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

1. Evaluation

Identifying critical structural roots and architecture.

2. Plating

Installing steel plates over roots before the pour.

3. Protection

Final pour with negligible displacement levels.

CASE STUDY: RESULTS & SUCCESS

Tree remained stable, healthy, and functional with zero loss of structural roots.

STRUCTURAL SUCCESS METRICS

Metric Category	Standard Approach	Root Bridging Approach
Root Survival	0 - 20% (Likely Death)	100% (Fully Preserved)
Future Repair Cycle	Frequent (3-5 Years)	Extended (15+ Years)
Liability Exposure	High (Tree Failure)	Low (Defensible Science)

BENEFITS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

Builders & Developers

Demonstrate good-faith preservation efforts and meet local ordinances without compromising site utility.

Municipalities

Preserve valuable canopy cover and shade while reducing long-term repair costs on public right-of-ways.

LOWERING LIABILITY AND CLAIMS

- **Forensic Defensibility:** Using research-backed methods in legal matters.
- **Shade Preservation:** Maintaining property value through canopy.
- **Cost Efficiency:** Lower future repair costs and remediation.
- **Hazard Prevention:** Ensuring trees don't become risks near homes.

THE EXPERT CONCLUSION

> *When roots and infrastructure conflict, cutting roots should be the last option, not the first.*

— Matt Latham, Master Arborist

ABOUT MATT LATHAM

Matt Latham, BCMA & RCA

ISA Board Certified Master Arborist #TX-3737B

ASCA Registered Consulting Arborist #859

Matt specializes in forensic tree failure analysis, construction-related tree impacts, and expert testimony in complex legal matters involving tree preservation.

Questions?

Evaluating sites based on species, root architecture, and soil conditions.

Contact: 409.995.7940 | www.arboristondemand.com