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Making sure trees stay healthy

Local councils must keep checking on them and maintain records, says expert

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KEPONG: Local councils in the country should keep an inventory of their trees and their health as well as conduct scheduled inspections to ensure that they do not fall without warning like in a recent case in Singapore.

Forest Research Institute of Malaysia's (FRIM) botanical gardens head Adnan Mohammad (pic) said currently, only the local council in Putrajaya and City Hall maintained an extensive record of their trees.

"Not all local councils have the expertise or the budget to do so," he



said, adding that this was no mean feat as some had "hundreds of thousands" of trees under them.

The next best thing, said Adnan, who is an arborist, was to keep close tabs on trees at public places, such as parks or areas in the city with heavy traffic.

"We owe a duty of care to the public. In the event a local council is being sued for negligence, the record of our inspections can be used as evidence in court," he said.

He believes this to be the case with the massive tembusu tree

which fell and killed a woman in the Singapore Botanic Gardens on Feb 11 despite it having been inspected and given a clean bill of health just five months before.

At the time of the incident, the weather was clear.

Adnan said trees in cities lived in a stressful environment, where they were exposed to pollution and had limited space to grow.

"Why do trees tumble? There is no single factor. The trees may be old, their roots may be decayed or their trunk hollowed. In such cases, heavy rain and strong winds could uproot them," he said.

He also advised the public to avoid taking shelter under trees during thunderstorms due to light-

ning and the risk of these being uprooted.

"It is best to avoid being under a tree or even park your car under one during thunderstorms," he said, urging the public to notify their local councils should they spot sickly or dead trees.

Adnan, who has been an arborist for the past 33 years, travels across the peninsula regularly to hold seminars on urban forestry as well as to give training at local councils.

He said when arborists – also known as tree surgeons – were called in, they would first make a visual inspection of the tree's "body language".

"If the tree's crown and trunk are healthy, this usually means its roots

are as well," said Adnan, adding that if it was suspected to be suffering from rot or cavities, sonar equipment would be brought in to assess the extent of its damage.

Once this is done, the arborist will decide on remedial action, which usually involves pruning the tree.

"What we want to do is to reduce the weight of the tree to prevent it from falling in case of strong winds.

"This is usually done by pruning the crown and some of the branches," said Adnan.

Pruning, he said, must be overseen by an experienced arborist or there was a risk of "butchering" the tree, which could worsen its condition.