

# WHAT'S THAT PLANT WORTH?'

by Jack Siebenthaler

With increasing frequency ornamental plant appraisals are being used to establish current values which, in the view of trained appraisers, are realistic. These values are used for several reasons; determining casualty losses from storms, freezes or other acts of nature; determining losses from the vandalizing efforts of individuals; measuring losses caused by careless construction equipment use; establishing values of plant materials for the purpose of determining fair and equitable sales prices during liquidation procedures, and, finally, to place values on plants which are threatened with anticipated damages from utility improvements, outside construction and other reuse of land.

Because most of the appraisal work involves a visual concern for the material under consideration, most of the work should be performed in the field where the actual plant(s) may be observed under current conditions. Occasionally, a situation requires the appraisal to be performed from evidence other than visual observation. In such instances, the deductions to be drawn can only be those which are supportable from obvious facts such as well-defined pictures, affidavits and other supporting documentation.

Basic factors are firmly established in plant appraisals which become the basis for establishing values. The factors are the "skeleton" on which the "fleshing out" of the appraised value is hung. Size, kind, condition and location of the individual specimen plants are of primary importance.

A valuable tool in the work of appraising plants is a diameter tape or caliper instrument which is used for establishing the diameter of most trees. Those plant materials which are not ordinarily sized by diameter, such as shrubs, vines, ground covers, etc. are evaluated on the basis of height, spread and/or square footage.

The kind or species or variety of the plant is of great importance in arriving at the evaluation, since many plants are considered to be in one or another strata of values. Depending somewhat on

local usage as well as on established listings, tree types, in particular, are subject to this sort of differentiation. When such lists or differences are used, a percentage of basic value is put into practice which becomes one of the ingredients of the final formula.

The condition of the plant under observation is of great importance in establishing a current value. Regardless of the kind or size of the plant, it may have greater or lesser value because of its physical condition. Deformed parts, whether due to crowding, storm damage, fire or insect or disease damage, or any of a number of other causes will affect the condition value to some degree and need to be closely observed during the inspection.

Location of a plant is important in determining its value, especially when it is in close proximity to buildings, utility lines and other plants. The landscape use of plants often is a highly rated factor of value which can heavily weight the outcome of the appraisal.

Recognizing the above criteria for appraisals, one can sense the need for a special application of talent, based on training and experience, which is necessary for satisfactory results in plant appraising. No longer is it adequate for one to say, "I am a nurseryman!", and automatically be qualified for many types of plant appraisal work. With the advent of more environmental concerns, higher urban development and sophisticated pollutants, to name a few of the problems, one engaged in horticultural appraisal work faces a continuous educational process in order to keep up. It is because of this need for continuing education, as well as the recognition of horticultural appraisals as a viable science, that appraisal courses are now being conducted at special workshops and are being incorporated in college curricula at several institutions. Membership in such professional organizations as the "American Society of Consulting Arborists" and the "American Society of Appraisers" offers great opportunity for im-

provement in the field.

The ideal time for a plant appraisal based on a casualty occurrence is when the maximum damage from the occurrence is manifested. This is not always possible and many appraisals are conducted at times which are less than optimum insofar as desirability is concerned. Initial observations of apparent fire damage may be misleading, for example. The inroads of the damage may be more severe after a period of time has elapsed. The trained eye of the appraiser must be able to judge, based on all of the evidence available, what the possible consequences might be. To have the privilege of waiting for a year or two in order to make the final judgement is not always the case.

In a situation involving anticipated damages, the appraisal can often be conducted under more suitable circumstances. Here all of the factors which determine the value formula are readily discernible and a value judgement can be made which is based on all of the ingredients as seen at the site.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the plant appraisal field at this time is that of educating those who can best benefit from such service — the general public. This sector, including the legal and insurance professions, does not adequately recognize the value of such services. Not only does this reflect on appraisers as a group, but it more seriously reflects on the place which plants occupy in the minds of the public. If we were to be faced with the loss or destruction of our jewelry, antiques or house, there would be little or no delay about getting the value established and instituting a claim.

More often than we care to admit, the appraising

profession experiences reactions from insurance and tax personnel which reflect a serious disregard for true plant values: values which are high in the opinions of those who work with and purchase plants.

Confusion also exists in the mind of the "non-professional evaluator" who tends to mix sometimes adverse information concerning certain landscape plants with the otherwise aesthetic values which actually determine the appraisal value. A genuine landscape value for a tree species, for example, need not be lost because of otherwise detracting values in other areas of the growing range of the species. What is considered to be a possible liability in one extreme of a species' growing range does not necessarily qualify that species for devaluation over its entire range.

The makeup of a professional landscape or horticultural appraiser might best be found in a combination of talents. These include those of plant grower, landscape architect, steady student of horticultural practices and one who makes a conscientious effort to blend those skills into an amalgam of common sense which is focused on the problem of establishing values. Add to all of this the ability to keenly observe and discern all of the facts.

Our end product is not a superman of horticulture; it's just the type of person we all like to think we are!

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