

I LOVE tree-lined roads. They are usually lovely to look at and offer welcome shade to pedestrians and motorists.

In my town of Petaling Jaya, a few roads stand out for me because of that. Roads like Jalan Universiti (renamed Jalan Prof Diraja Ungku Aziz) and Jalan Templer. Closer to home is Jalan SS4A/1 that, until very recently, had enormous trees that made the pavement leading from the Taman Bahagia LRT station a pleasant walk home.

Several weeks ago, I saw local council workers chopping down five magnificent trees along that road; my knee-jerk reaction was one of dismay and annoyance.

Those trees had been there forever, or at least since I moved into the nearby housing estate 20 years ago, and were always a welcome sight on the way home after a long work day.

After days of sawing down the trees, all that was left were five raw stumps.

I mourned the loss of those leafy sentinels until May 7.

That was when the shocking tragedy occurred in Jalan Sultan Ismail in the heart of busy Kuala Lumpur: an enormous tree uprooted, damaged the monorail track and crushed 17 cars, killing one man and injuring two others.

The dash cam video capturing the moment the tree crashed was simply terrifying. Yes, it was raining but there was nothing to indicate that the tree was about to crash. In fact, the way it fell was as if the video was being played in slow motion.

Late last month, a severe storm had also toppled trees that damaged 14 cars in eight places in KL. The continuing bad weather caused trees to topple in 10 locations in Penang around the same time as the Jalan Sultan Ismail incident. Perhaps because there were no human casualties, there was hardly any public reaction to those incidents.

Now, a third massive tree on Jalan Pinang, KL, has tumbled down. It happened on Monday, damaging seven cars. Fortunately,

KL trees are falling down, falling down...

That's why there is an urgent need to prevent them from becoming lethal agents of destruction.

JUNE HL WONG



So aunty, so what?

there were no reported fatalities or injuries.

Trees being uprooted is not a new phenomenon but the frequency of it happening is very real in the era of climate change.

After the Jalan Sultan Ismail tragedy, the authorities were quick to explain how city trees were managed. Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Federal Territories) Dr Zaliha Mustafa said trees in KL are checked every two years. An arborist responded to say trees in heavily built-up areas should be inspected at least every year to ensure they are in good health.

Three days later, Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) issued a statement saying out of 175 trees identified as high-risk, 147 had been felled since 2019. The majority of the trees were over 50 years old.

It added that the latest inspection by certified arborists was in February this year and 28 trees were marked for "imminent removal".

I don't know how long "immi-

nent" is in DBKL's manual but I do hope the people in charge will get moving on chopping those dangerous trees down.

We were told the lethal tree in the May 7 incident was on private property but it was being monitored by the property owner and inspected by DBKL-certified arborists.

That's cold comfort for the victims. Much as we want and appreciate trees in the city for a greener environment, they must not become a deadly and destructive menace in our midst. The responsibility lies squarely on the authorities to make our streets safe from falling trees, much as we want them to provide shade, add colour and beauty, and improve the air quality of our cities.

According to a 2011 study titled "Street Tree Inventory and Tree Risk Assessment of Selected Major Roads in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia" by M. Sreetheran, M. Adnan and AK Khairil, "A tree is considered hazardous if it possesses some type of structural defect associated with a target, such as buildings, vehicles, pavements or picnic areas where people and property are present."

The authors noted then that while tree-planting programmes in Malaysia had progressed well over the decades, "the subsequent management of the street trees, particularly at Kuala Lumpur City Hall, is not well undertaken due to inadequate information for management and maintenance purposes".

"There has never been a systematic tree survey conducted to inventory street trees in Kuala Lumpur," they wrote in the abstract for their study, which was published in *Arboriculture & Urban Forestry*, the scientific journal of the International Society of Arboriculture.

They pointed out that DBKL needed to conduct a tree inventory and regular inspection so that "an arborist will learn a great deal about the defects in trees that have symptoms and signs of potential trouble and even the degree of risk. Through a systematic inspection, information of the potential tree hazards in a city can be revealed, leading to proactive management to reduce risk and enhance public safety".

That was 13 years ago. DBKL stated regular inspections are carried out but whether there is a full inventory, enough arborists and funding to do the job properly is anyone's guess.

But clearly this is one area of concern, admittedly among many, that the government must look into.

An occasional falling tree was perhaps not seen as a huge problem. But climate change has led to extremely severe storms with high winds that have increased the vulnerability and, therefore, the danger trees can pose in our increasingly crowded and overbuilt cities, with deadly and costly consequences.

It's a global issue and, interestingly, a study by Shanghai-based

researchers published in *Frontiers in Earth* in April 2024 titled "Construction of street tree risk assessment system and empirical analysis based on nondestructive testing technologies" pointed out that the traditional visual tree assessment method in evaluating tree risks is subjective and "therefore not effective in precisely detecting internal decay in tree trunk and root systems".

To improve the accuracy of street tree risk assessment, the authors proposed a new testing method that combines different non-destructive testing technologies, such as sonic tomography and ground-penetrating radar that can significantly increase the accuracy of risk assessment in tree trunks and roots.

The method was applied to evaluate the risk of 1,001 street trees in Shanghai's historical feature protected area. The authors found that despite most street trees having low branch and trunk risk levels, more than one-third had high root risk factors in the trunk and root system, "with a significant correlation between the street tree risk level and tree cavities, diseases and insect pests, as well as the depth and range of the root distribution, leaning and internal decay in trunks".

They added that with such testing and risk assessment analysis, coupled with targeted prevention measures, "the possibility of street risk damage was largely reduced, including street trees tilting and collapsing during typhoons" and the like.

We may have scored high on our tree-planting efforts to create "garden cities" but we are also notoriously weak when it comes to our maintenance culture.

This has to change so that every time there is a severe storm, Malaysians won't have to drive with their hearts in their mouths along tree-lined roads.

What happened on May 7 can happen to any of us.

The views expressed here are entirely the writer's own.