Hemlock Decks & Porches Issues Guidance on Tree Limb Risks to Decks

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HARTFORD, CT - September 08, 2026 -
Hemlock Decks & Porches has issued guidance on how tree limb failure affects deck and porch structures, noting that the weather pattern Massachusetts recorded during July matches the conditions arboricultural research associates with sudden limb loss from otherwise healthy trees.

Massachusetts received between 4.5 and nearly 9.5 inches of rain during July, more than is typical for the month, following an extended dry period. State environmental officials announced on August 7 that the Central and Northeast Regions remained in Level 2 Significant Drought despite that rainfall, citing the slower pace at which groundwater recovers.

That sequence is significant for trees. Research published in Arboriculture and Urban Forestry, the journal of the International Society of Arboriculture, documents a phenomenon commonly called summer branch drop, in which apparently sound limbs break from mature trees during calm weather with no wind involved. The literature records the effect across species from at least 19 genera and dates formal observation to the 1880s. No single cause has been established, though current theories point to internal moisture changes, drought stress and bacterial wetwood. The same research notes the failures occur both on hot, calm afternoons and during calm weather following heavy summer rain that ends a period of increasing soil dryness.

Longer term drought effects compound the picture. UMass Extension's Center for Agriculture, Food and the Environment reports that sustained drought produces dieback of branches, damages a tree's capacity to absorb water, and heightens susceptibility to disease and insect invasion. It also notes that opportunistic root pathogens invade when roots are weakened by stress, and that a large tree with an extensive root system may not show visible decline until a substantial portion of that root system is affected, sometimes several years after the drought event itself.

"The trees people worry about are the ones that already look dead, and those are not usually the ones that come down on a deck," said Teddy Labonte, Owner of Hemlock Decks & Porches. "A green limb that lets go on a still afternoon is the one nobody saw coming, and it lands on a structure that was never designed to take a hit like that."

The structural point is about the type of load rather than the amount. Deck framing is designed for distributed loads, meaning the weight of the structure itself plus people and furniture spread across the surface. A falling limb delivers a concentrated impact load at a single point, which is a different demand entirely. The visible result may be a cracked board, but the consequential damage is often below the surface at a joist, a beam or a connection, where a compromised member is not apparent from above.

Root systems raise a separate question at the foundation. Tree roots commonly extend laterally well past the canopy edge, and UMass Extension notes that most of a tree's water absorbing roots sit within roughly the first 10 to 14 inches of soil rather than at depth. Continued root growth near a footing can alter the surrounding soil over time, and the effect is gradual rather than sudden, which is part of why it tends to be identified late.

Hemlock Decks & Porches installs both helical piers and traditional concrete footings, selected according to the soil profile, the loads involved and the depth at which suitable bearing is present. Where mature trees sit near a planned deck footprint, root location becomes one of the factors weighed in that selection alongside soil conditions and drainage. The appropriate approach is determined by evaluation of the specific site.

The company noted that assessing the health or stability of a tree is not a deck contractor's judgment to make, and that a limb of any size overhanging a structure is a question for a certified arborist rather than a builder. What falls within a contractor's scope is the structure underneath, whether it has taken damage, and whether that damage is confined to the surface or has reached the framing.

"We can tell a homeowner what a limb did to their framing," Labonte said. "Whether the rest of that tree is sound is a different profession, and the honest answer is to bring in somebody who does that for a living."

Ahead of the period when severe weather is most likely, the company suggested homeowners note what sits directly above an outdoor structure. Structures that have already taken an impact may show cracked decking, a joist out of plane, or fasteners displaced near the point of contact.

Hemlock Decks & Porches provides deck repair, resurfacing and full replacement where impact damage has affected the decking, the framing or both. More information is available at hemlockcontractingco.com.

Hemlock Decks & Porches is a family-owned deck, porch and outdoor living contractor operating across Massachusetts and Connecticut, and is a TrexPro Platinum Installer and TimberTech Gold PRO Contractor.

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Hemlock Contracting of CT

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