

# ARBORESCENCE

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an even more Olympian task



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By Jon Picker

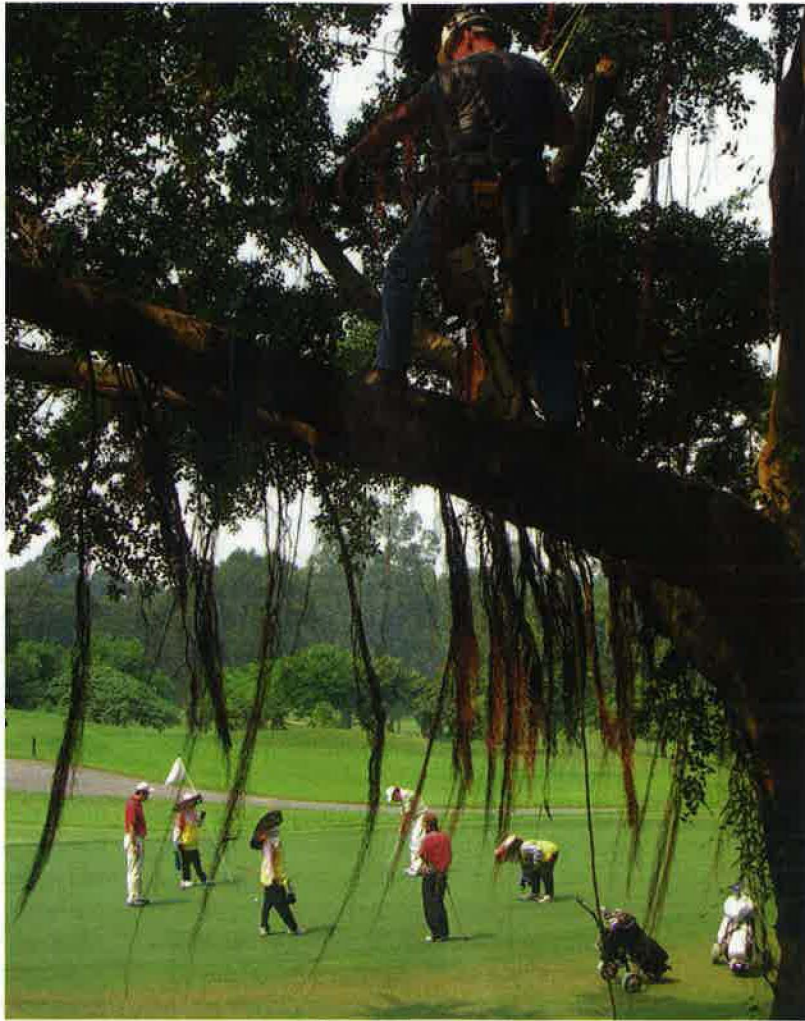
All photos courtesy of Asia Tree Preservation, Ltd.

Arboriculture is an evolving practice in Asia, and one firm is not only helping train local arborists, but also assisting in the preparation for some major events in Hong Kong. Asia Tree Preservation, Ltd. (ATP) was incorporated in Hong Kong in 2007 and is comprised of certified arborists who relocated from the Chicago area to China with plans to offer tree care services and arboriculture training to the Asian region. Since its inception, ATP has engaged in multiple training efforts, major projects, has helped prepare for a PGA European Tour event, and has even been involved with efforts leading up to the 2008 Summer Olympic Games.

### Preserving turf through proper pruning

As Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson, author of the 1975 book *Sociobiology*, once stated, "I believe that the reason that people find well-landscaped golf courses 'beautiful' is that they look like savannas, down to the scattered trees, copses and lakes..." But trees on a course may, at times, hinder turfgrass growth. In *Golf Course Tree Management*, Sharon Lilly stated, "Golf course superintendents may curse the trees for the problems trees cause in caring for the turf. But this is a love/hate relationship for the superintendents because they realize that trees are critical to the course."

Because of the need for tree management, the Hong Kong Golf Club (HKGC) hired Certified



Jeff Legue of Asia Tree Preservation trimming a *Ficus microcarpa*

Arborist and Landscape Manager, Prisca Tsui. The 122 year-old course at HKGC is lined by hundreds of *Melaleuca* and *Eucalyptus* trees, some as tall as 30 meters (100 feet). Trees of this size can cast large shadows on the turfgrass, making it difficult to grow. In addition, wind-damaged trees and dead limbs can be hazardous to golfers. However, trees are also an important part of a golf course.

"Turfgrass can be replaced, but a full-sized tree takes years to grow," said Tsui. "Pruning trees can reduce potential danger to people, as well as keep trees healthy in the long run."

To manage trees of this size requires a high level of experience and expertise. As the practice of arboriculture has only recently been introduced in Asia, Tsui requested the help of Oriental Landscape of Swire House Group and ATP in preparation for the PGA European Tour's UBS Hong Kong Open in November 2007.

The preparation for the Hong Kong Open involved the pruning of more than 50 trees to allow more light for turfgrass growth, while maintaining the form and function of the trees.

Tsui's plans for creating a long-term solution for golf course tree management included the training of a tree management team. She requested ATP to train her staff in chain saw field safety and maintenance. This involved two days of intense training in chain saw use and personal protective equipment.

"The training was eye-opening, even for someone who has used a chain saw for a long time," said Tsui.

Don Picker, managing director of ATP, said, "The chain saw safety course should prepare them for the dangers of using a chain saw, both on the ground and in a tree. With continued study and practice in arboriculture, I'm convinced HKGC will have a strong, self-sustaining, tree management program."





Don Picker of Asia Tree Preservation pruning a Casuarina tree

### Shedding some light on Olympic equestrian

In August 2008, HKGC will be the venue for the Olympic equestrian cross country course. From the Beas River Country Club and the adjacent Hong Kong Golf Club, a 5.7-km temporary cross country track, 10 meters in width, is being con-

structed. Sam Bauer, equestrian course superintendent, requested the help of ATP's arborists to increase both airflow and sunlight on the horse jumps and surrounding areas for the purpose of turfgrass growth, as well as to allow more light for live worldwide video coverage of the event.

"Many of the horse jump zones have been built in locations with trees to add obstacles and to create 'effect' for the course design," said Bauer. "But the lack of sunlight in Hong Kong makes managing turfgrass a difficult task. In addition to this, trying to grow turf in locations shaded by trees becomes even more challenging. Asia Tree Preservation was brought in to prune/thin trees to allow more sunlight to reach my turf canopy and increase airflow. The work that ATP did has shown a dramatic increase in my turf quality, and the best part is that I can't even tell that they were here."

"Tree pruning has had obvious benefits in increasing airflow and light penetration," Bauer added. "In addition, we are using supplemental lighting and high-powered fans to help reverse the effects of these microclimates."



From left to right: Don Picker, Jeff Legue and Jon Picker of Asia Tree Preservation.

*Jon Picker is a Certified Arborist, and member of Asia Tree Preservation, Ltd., Hong Kong. He can be reached via e-mail at [jonpicker@atptree.com](mailto:jonpicker@atptree.com)*

# Q&A with Asia Tree Preservation

*Arbor Age* magazine recently asked Don Picker, Jon Picker and Jeff Legue of Asia Tree Preservation, Ltd. (ATP) to share their thoughts about doing business overseas.

**AA:** What factors led to you relocating to Asia?

**Don Picker:** My wife and I moved to Asia with our family in 1990 for the first time just after I completed my degree in Cross Cultural Communications with an emphasis in social research and linguistics. Although I had operated Picker Tree Experts already for more than 5 years, I sold the company, we ventured off to Hong Kong and south China, and spent more than 4-1/2 years studying languages and culture, and also doing relief and development among poor mountain minority groups.

**AA:** How long of a process was it from the time you decided to start a business in Asia until the time it became a reality? And what challenges/obstacles did you face?

**Don:** In 1999, after the first period in Asia, we returned to the United States and settled in the Chicago area until 2004. Almost immediately after returning to the Midwest, I decided to go back into the business of tree work. Fortunately, I had many contacts who liked my work, so I landed a good contract for more than \$20,000 just as winter began, and decided to start Picker Tree Experts II. During the time back in the United States, our kids were reoriented to their own native culture and started off on their own. Jon had already completed a two-year Associate of Arts degree, then decided he would like to do tree work for a while just to have the experience. I used the next 4-1/2 years to catch up with all the new innovations and applications in arboriculture, and pursued the certifications that I previously did not have a chance to take advantage of because I was living in Asia.

In the summer of 2001, I met two Chinese managers from the China Light & Power Co. at the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) conference in Milwaukee. I immediately was interested to speak Cantonese with them and

discovered that they had recently sought training for pruning trees with live wires for the first time. My original experience was with Asplundh and Wright Tree Service in the mid-1970s doing utility line clearance. So the fact that the Chinese were seeking help gave me the first real incentive to begin to think about doing this business in Asia. After another year passed, I was able to begin to make trips to train either the power company crews or other government bodies using Cantonese as the medium of instruction. In 2004, we decided to venture back to Asia and try to make a go of professional careers there — my wife in music teaching and me in arboriculture. In 2006, Jon decided to move back to Asia and become a Certified Arborist and also make this his career in Asia. He spent the first year and half studying Mandarin so that he could function well in the culture and eventually be able to train in China. We decided to settle in Kunming, Yunnan south China because it is one of the botanical centers of China and this city, known as "the city of eternal spring," is similar to the environment of Denver with a very mild temperature year round.



# COVER STORY



Don Picker training basic tree climbing in Hong Kong in 2008.

In the latter part of 2007 we officially incorporated in Hong Kong when we secured good contracts that carried us into the middle of 2008 and provided the start that we needed.

**AA:** Is your relocation to Asia permanent?

**Don:** It has taken a great deal of time investment in language study and much more of life in general, so I think at present our plan would be to stay in Asia indefinitely. Jon is in many ways more comfortable in Asia than the United States — having grown up in Hong Kong, China, and Malaysia between the ages of 10 and 18 — so I know he is committed to Asia long-term.

In 2005 we were also joined by Jeff Legue, a longtime friend originally from northern Illinois. Jeff was one of the first few hundred Certified Arborists in 1992 as the program was started. He had also operated PickerTree Experts I for the new owner who purchased it from us in 1989. Jeff has a long history in tree care with many companies and utility clearance outfits. He brings to ATP a special focus in tree diseases and pest problems, of which he has continued to expand his understanding in Asia. Jeff has also been able to experiment with tree propagation in Yunnan, which could open another entire opportunity with the need for landscaping in the growing cities of China.

**AA:** What are some of the challenges that you face on a day-to-day basis in terms of doing business in China?

**Don:** One of the biggest challenges is having to travel out of our home city in Kunming to multiple places in Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore, and often just feel temporary. We presently do not

yet see the real possibility to work in this industry in a real high level in China or to make the kind of money we need to live. However, we love to travel and experience new cultures and trees and all that Asia offers — and find ways to make it work with good planning and relationship building wherever we go.

**AA:** How would you describe the level of arboricultural expertise in Asia, and what areas do you feel are most lacking when it comes to proper tree care practices?

**Don:** Although the modern practice of arboriculture is very new in Asia — since about 2001 when Dr. Bill Fountain of the University of Kentucky had a sabbatical in Singapore and trained the first Certified Arborists — the total number of Certified Arborists has now exceed all the total number of Certified Arborists in Europe. With the heightened awareness of the environment, and the need to practice conservation, the modern societies of Asia are very interested in applying modern and appropriate arboriculture practices. Although the United States and European countries have a longer history of modern arboriculture applications, the Asians will do what they always do and catch up by leaps and bounds. The mere need for experience in practice in time is the only hindrance to their rapid advancement in modern



Don Picker training with Chinese PowerPoint

practices that I see here. The governments will actually come in line with the applications of practitioners of modern arboriculture much more rapidly than the western countries in general. You will eventually see tree ordinances applied in many of the most advanced societies such as Singapore and Hong Kong. The most interesting thing that I notice is that those who are choosing to become Certified Arborists in Asia are people from all kinds of other spheres such as landscape architects, civil engineers, city planners and government overseers of the environment in general.

**AA:** How much of your work is education/training vs. actual hands-on tree care work?

## About Asia Tree Preservation, Ltd.

**Incorporated:** Hong Kong, 2007

**Staff:** Don Picker, Jeff Legue, and Jon Picker — all certified arborists from the Chicago area who chose to relocate to Asia to promote arboriculture practices. Don Picker speaks Cantonese and Mandarin and, when necessary, trains in these languages. Jon Picker is also currently studying Mandarin to do the same.

### Clients and jobs of note:

- Preparation for the Olympic Equestrian Event to take place August 2008 in Hong Kong.
- Preparation for PGA European Tour's UBS Hong Kong Open, November 15-18, 2007.
- Preservation of special mature trees at the Historic Marine Police Headquarters in Tsim Sha Tsui, Hong Kong

### Training sessions throughout Asia:

- Forestry Research Institute (FRIM) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia with Dr. Bill Fountain, ISA vice president.

- China Light & Power Co. utility crews.
- Leisure & Cultural Services Department (LCSD).
- Agriculture Fisheries & Conservation Department (AFCD).
- Hong Kong Golf Club tree management team.
- Hong Kong Disneyland Horticulture Teams.
- Different Hong Kong government departments
- Mulberry Farm Sericulturists (Silk Production) in Laos. The age-old practice of growing Mulberry trees to feed silk worms for the production of silk materials brings financial assistance to many of the local Lao as well as the hill-tribes peoples such as the Mien (Yao) and Hmong.



**Don:** As you might imagine, the real earnings are in the training and conveying of our experience and skills in modern arboriculture. However, because of the interest in Hong Kong to practice serious tree preservation, we can find some good opportunities for real work that will also pay well. At ATP we have a slogan that says "training in real modern 21st century tree practices," which means that we are always looking for the practical jobs and hands-on tree care in order to really teach those who want to learn. If we are hired to train for three days or a week, etc., the biggest issue usually to be given lower scores in an evaluation is "not enough practical examples." This is usually when some other organization hires us and is limited in their ability to plan for real tree work illustrations. We often offer to prune trees and remove hazardous trees for private groups, such as camps and recreational sites, in exchange for a training site with the practical examples we feel will really allow us to convey the practice of real tree work.

**AA:** Have region-specific tree species, tree pests and/or even the regional climate presented any unique challenges for you? If so, how?

**Jon Picker:** Yes, for example, in Malaysia, there is a danger of encountering snakes in trees, as well as large nests of ants. While training at the Forestry Research Institute in Kuala Lumpur, ants were climbing down my rope while I was climbing up. Because of the high humidity and tropical climate, grass often grows on the tree limbs and can serve as a nest for animals and insects.

**Don:** It is always a challenge for us to continue to learn as we move about from tropical to more tropical areas. We have seen more new species in the last several years than we can sort out, and this keeps our work even more interesting and challenging. However, there is always a good local expert to help us as we try to sort it all out, and this is also one of the great aspects of the work in Asia. Working with Chinese, Malaysian, Indian, and Singaporeans is just a great experience and we have made many lifelong friends here.

**AA:** The upcoming Olympic Games have obviously been at the forefront of your thoughts, at least from a work perspective. The fact that the Olympics are being held in China has been controversial in the United States and abroad. From your perspective, what has been the feeling locally surrounding the games?

**Don:** Since the 2008 Olympics will take place in China it is generally a high level of excitement in the whole Asian region. Everyone, especially in Hong Kong, is looking forward to this historic opportunity to be a part of what so many other western societies may take for granted. I personally sense that China really does want to use this as a chance to come out, so to speak, and be a part of the rest of the world in a very normal and natural way. Of course, China still has many issues that challenge its entry into the world at large as an open and equal society, but they are on a course to change that cannot practically be reversed now.

**Jon:** In regards to any controversy about the Olympics and protests, it has been overshadowed by the devastating earthquake that

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# COVER STORY



Jon Picker, Don Picker, and ISA Vice President Dr. Bill Fountain were training people in preparation for the Certified Arborist exam in January 2007. Fountain had spent a couple months there training people at the Forestry Research Institute - Malaysia (FRIM) and proctored the Certified Arborist exam following the training.

recently hit Sichuan Province, China. Jeff Legue of ATP joined the earthquake recovery effort as a volunteer.

**Jeff Legue:** When the government invited volunteers, I felt compelled to go to Sichuan and help in any way that I could. My team and I joined the efforts by dressing the wounds of earthquake victims in two small villages near MianYang, Sichuan.

**AA:** What advice would you give to other professional arborists who are thinking about relocation or even doing business abroad?

**Don:** In the United States or other western settings, people can have contact with others from around the world to be exposed to the culture and languages in order to provide some experience. However, I suggest that people travel while they are single and young, and live for a short period in a few places in order to determine if they could potentially make a major transition.

They should study language while in those areas and gain experience. Once a person has determined to relocate abroad, I would then suggest dedicating at least two years to language and culture acquisition. If you do not budget to do this purposefully, and with a school in mind, then it will be very hard to accomplish later after you have begun to become busy with life and work.

By the way, while attending the ISA conference in St. Louis this July we will be interviewing some people who are interested in relocating to Asia to work with us. So if anyone who reads this is interested and wants to meet at the conference, please contact us at [contact@asiatreepreservation.com](mailto:contact@asiatreepreservation.com) **A/!**

## Don Picker to Speak at ISA Conference and Trade Show

*Grand Scale Tree Assessment in Malaysian Borneo; "East Meets West, A Cross-Cultural Challenge"*

*Tuesday, July 29, 4:30-5 p.m.*

Don Picker of Asia Tree Preservation, Ltd., will be a featured speaker at the ISA Conference and Trade Show, July 26-31, in St. Louis, Mo.

He will present a well-documented report with PowerPoint presentation and video clips — providing the context of tree assessment for a major oil company's Asian Pacific Headquarters housing community on the shores of the South China Sea in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. Picker will describe the challenges presented by a situation in which a remedy is required for identifying hazardous trees from among more than 4,000 trees that were "lopped" (topped) indiscriminately at 15 meters eight years earlier. The present project was initiated due to a serious incident in which a wind-fallen branch broke through an asbestos roof in the community landing near the bed of a child. A Chinese-owned company, its crews and a local "log grader" had already been given a contract and started work when the international community representatives stopped the progress based on many reasons, some educated and others emotional.

This presentation will provide a unique description of a cross-cultural context where workers' families still live in ancestral long houses in the thick jungles. It will also address the clash of culture and influence as oil company officials and upper-level directors have extremely opposing views of how to handle the environment.

The audience will be challenged to interact and offer ideas as to how Picker could satisfy all the players and still perform an objective and professional job while leaving the community safe and as much of the environment in tact as possible. Picker will describe the final remedy, which, in addition to removal, involved a careful choice of "Crown Cleaning" and training to accomplish it. The presentation will also include a discussion of adaptations of the hazard tree form in order to accomplish assessment.



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