Christmas ornaments are lovely, aren’t they? These colorful baubles that swing gaily from the bushy branches of a fragrant fir can make our little hearts sing. They are not, however, excellent role models for air sports athletes. If you end up gracing tree branches, you might want to take some of your forced treetop time to think very carefully about how you got there. According to the USPA Skydive’s Information Manual Section 4 — Category A, a few things that can help you stay clear of the foliage are “properly preparing for the canopy flight by observing the winds;” “planning an appropriate landing pattern” and “choosing the correct exit and opening points.” To paraphrase: You messed up, kid. But let’s move on …
YOUR EIGHT-STEP DAMAGE-CONTROL PLAN

If you discover that you’re on an imminent collision course with a tree, here’s what you need to do:

1. **Make sure you’re flying into the wind.** Don’t make any low turns but don’t downwind a tree landing either, if you can help it. You may not have a windsock to steer by, but—hey, lucky you!—you have at least one tree to use as a reference. Watch the movement of its branches to determine the wind direction.

2. **Fly in half-brakes.** Your aim is to slow your canopy down as much as possible for the impact. Fly your final approach in half-brakes, taking care not to stall your canopy in the process.

3. **Go for the middle.** Your goal is to make impact at the central trunk of the tree. If you miss the middle of the tree, you run the risk of clipping the tree with one of your canopy’s lines or cells, which will likely collapse the canopy and dump you on the ground in a yowling pile.

4. **Keep yourself together.** As if making a properly executed parachute landing fall (PLF), hug your body toward the midline, as though you were inside a mummy-style sleeping bag. Hold your legs together snugly also, and keep them springy at the knees. Continue to fly your canopy until you contact the tree.

   Just before impact, draw your forearms together so that your elbows sit at your stomach, and draw your hands over your face. This position protects your belly, ribs and chest from being lanced by branches.
**5. Keep your hands to yourself.** Resist the urge to grab limbs to stop your fall, as this will only leave vast areas of your body unprotected from veritable armies of sharp branches that are about to mobilize for the attack.

**6. Assume a hard landing.** More often than not, a parachutist who lands in a tree does not stay in the tree. Usually, the jumper falls right through, snapping branches and leaving shredded bits of canopy all the way down. Keep that PLF position as best you can in order to make the landing as soft as possible when the tree finally sees fit to deposit you at its feet.

**7. Get comfortable.** Have you actually managed to stay in the tree? Oh, great. Stay there. A great many injuries occur not during tree landings themselves, but rather from the jumpers’ failed attempts to detach themselves from their mangled equipment and climb down. In general, if you’re more than a few feet or so over the ground and have any hope of rescue, wait for that rescue to arrive.

If you’re phone-less, radio-less, buddy-less, out of public earshot and generally bereft of help, there’s a small chance that a hook knife will help. In the unlikely event that your suspension lines envelop you (you’re more likely to be dangling under them), you could use the hook knife to—gulp—disentangle yourself from any lines that might accidentally throttle you or cause serious rope burns as you fall to the ground.

**8. Be grateful.** Even if you shred your pricey gear, rejoice if you walk away from a tree landing uninjured. Gear can be replaced, and you lucked out, you lucky duck. See the bright side.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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