

Every Tree Counts: A D.C. Census of What Grows Where

By MELANIE CHOUKAS-BRADLEY
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Next Monday, more than 100 trained volunteers are due to hit the streets of Washington in Day-Glo green traffic-safety vests, armed with tape measures, handheld computers, digital cameras and a working knowledge of the identification and health of trees.

College interns from around the country will be working with local volunteers and high school students, fanning out into every city neighborhood in teams of three.

By Aug. 15, if all goes well, the city's estimated 100,000 street trees and 38,000 empty street-tree spaces will have been inventoried and the identity, size and health of each tree plugged into a \$1 million database, which will be made available to various city agencies.

Mature street trees are one of the defining and unifying features of Washington, greening and shading neighborhoods from Anacostia to Chevy Chase. But if the city's pioneering tree lovers—George Washington and Thomas Jefferson—could see recent satellite images of the District, they would weep. The pictures show an approximate 50 percent loss in the city's tree canopy since 1973, according to estimates made by American Forests, a conservation organization.

The urban forest has fallen victim to neglect and municipal budget shortfalls, air pollution, inadequate root space and urban development. With each storm that sweeps through ravaging large old trees, residents fear damage and peril and another hole in the canopy.

As grim as things look, though, the high-tech tree census about to begin signals a change in fortunes for the maples, oaks, elms and other species of shade trees that line the streets.

The District's chief forester, Mark Buscaino, has told the volunteers that once armed with precise information about the state of each tree box in the city, the D.C. Urban Forestry Administration will be able to manage better such things as daily maintenance, future plantings, regular and emergency pruning, and removal of diseased and distressed street trees.

The inventory is being organized and funded by GCA Casey Trees Endowment Fund, known simply as Casey Trees, which was established last year when philanthropist Betty Brown Casey gave the Garden Club of America \$50 million for its creation. The fund also is studying optimum species and tree culture and eventually will supple-

ment the city government's current effort of planting at least 4,000 new trees a year.

But one vital aspect of reforesting the city is in getting neighborhoods involved so that individual citizens can water the trees and monitor their health. This is particularly critical for newly planted trees, especially in time of drought.

"We could have hired professional arborists to do the inventory, but chose to educate interns and volunteers in order to build community support for our city's trees," said Sheila Hogan, executive director of Casey Trees.

The scale of the effort recalls another period of reforestation. In the 1870s, Alexander "Boss" Shepherd, the District's second and last governor, ran the city into debt when he planted 60,000 trees. Thanks to those early efforts and citizens who imported their favorite trees from around the world, Washington became known as the City of Trees.

D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams has also championed the cause, increasing staffing and funding for trees. He plans to participate on Day 1 of the inventory, which will put 35 inventory teams on the streets, Monday through Saturday, for 11 weeks.

Barbara Deutsch, manager of Casey Trees' inventory project, told a recent class of volunteer trainees, "I love jigsaw puzzles."

Helping Out

It's not too late to get involved in the GCA Casey Trees summer inventory. Volunteers must enroll in a two-part classroom session and take a field trip before joining inventory teams, and must volunteer for five days of tree census-taking before Aug. 15.

By volunteering, you complete one-third of the requirements for a certificate in the D.C. Citizen Forester Certificate Program, sponsored by GCA Casey Trees, the mayor's office, the National Forest Service, the U.S. National Arboretum and the University of the District of Columbia.

Call 202-833-4010 or e-mail friends@caseytrees.org to register. The Web site is www.caseytrees.org.

Melanie Choukas-Bradley



Barbara Deutsch of Casey Trees, third from right, shows volunteers what to look for in the Washington tree count.

PHOTO BY MARIE POIRIER MARZI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

And that's just as well, because it will be her job to fit together the pieces of this unprecedented undertaking.

The goal is for the volunteers to inventory every city block. Hogan and Deutsch compare the leafy streets of Northwest Washington with the parched pavement of some less affluent neighborhoods and declare the re-greening of all of Washington "an environmental justice issue."

Each Casey Trees inventory threesome is headed up by a graduate and undergraduate college interns. The other team members are a mix of trained adult volunteers, high school students with the mayor's summer youth employment program, and participants in

AmeriCorps, the federal national service program. The interns, who arrived here last week for training, represent a range of academic specialties: landscape architecture, urban forestry, environmental science.

Claire Agre, who graduated from Duke University with a degree in environmental science and policy this month, will head an inventory team, hoping her work eventually will not only help trees but also "contribute toward reinvigorating D.C. communities."

Leading another inventory team, Sherry Frear will pay special attention to the small triangular spaces that occur where the District's broad avenues intersect with the street grid. Those little triangles (about 280 in the original federal city) are the topic of her Cornell University master's thesis in landscape architecture and an integral element of the city plan by Pierre Charles L'Enfant.

Most of the local adult volunteers come to the inventory as participants in the D.C. Citizen Forester Certificate Program. Volunteers are trained to recognize species, measure the trees' diameter and identify wounds, pests, fungal growths and branch dieback.

"I have been shocked that we've lost so much green,"

said volunteer Jane Townsend, who is among a number of city residents who have returned after several years to see a marked decline in the quantity and health of street trees.

"You're going to look at your world in a whole new way," Deutsch tells interns and volunteers during training sessions. "And you're going to be frustrated because our trees are so stressed."

She shares a stark statistic with her volunteers: The average life of an urban street tree is just seven to 15 years, decades short of its natural life span.

Deutsch and Hogan can spout off in their sleep how urban centers benefit from trees: cooler, cleaner air; a reduction in storm runoff; higher property values; lower rates of childhood asthma; better overall quality of community life.

They also have some less obvious tree facts at their fingertips: Consumers are willing to spend 12 percent more in stores with trees in front of them, and the healing time for patients is decreased if they can see trees outside their windows.

Now, it seems, it is time for the urban forest to mend.