

# PUBLIC AWARENESS AND URBAN FORESTRY IN OHIO

by Ralph C. Sievert, Jr.

Why does a city with an active tree program lack the funds needed to do an ideal job of managing public trees? Often the answer is that residents are unaware of where tax dollars are going. When this happens, even the most effective municipal tree program may find itself short-changed during budget appropriation time. However, with the most Tree City USA's in the nation for five consecutive years, Ohio's urban residents have proven that this need not be the case.

The reason behind the success of urban forestry in Ohio is a commitment to public awareness. In the past a shade tree commission or municipal forest manager would concentrate solely on the planting, maintenance and removal of public trees. Now it is recognized that a portion of their time must be directed towards public awareness. The reason for this added responsibility is that the public is more likely to support those municipal services that are considered desirable.

This does not mean that a municipality should allow planting, maintenance and removal to suffer for the sake of public awareness. In fact, each of these tasks provides a sound foundation on which to base public relations techniques. They all work together to form a positive image of a community tree program.

The uniting component of public awareness is media coverage. Newspaper, radio and television exposure all serve to maximize the results of positive action. When used in combination with individual and group meetings, it is possible to target virtually all benefiting taxpayers.

While public awareness techniques that are successful in one town may not be so elsewhere, they often lead to ones that are. By sharing ideas, municipalities are able to find comfortable ways to reach residents on this important topic. The following are some of the successful public awareness methods being used in Ohio today.

Planting new street trees is the most visible way of demonstrating the benefits of a tree program. Often a city will install new trees without informing the adjoining property owner. Since the early

1950's Wooster, Ohio has held neighborhood meetings to let property owners express their tree preferences within the parameters set by the shade tree commission. Residents gather at a neighbor's home to hear a presentation by the shade tree commission on choosing a suitable tree for their street. This not only involves participants in the decision making process but develops a sense of unity among neighbors regarding the trees planted.

It's a known fact that homeowners will care for trees more if they have an investment in them. Findlay, Ohio uses an adopt-a-tree program to encourage participation in its street tree planting program. The process begins with the homeowner filing an application at city hall. The tree commission purchases the tree and approves the planting site. In the spring homeowners can pick up their tree for planting but first pay a minimal administrative fee. The combinations of a financial and labor investment result in the participant providing extra care for the growing tree.

Community involvement also occurs in Wadsworth, Ohio. Citizens may request trees on their street by obtaining a petition from the service director. The residents then canvas their block for signatures. A majority of signatures on the petition assures that the area will be considered for planting by the shade tree commission. Because participating residents are assessed according to the frontage of their property, there is a financial commitment as well as a genuine desire for trees.

If such intensive public contacts are not possible, a simple letter can help. In Dover, Ohio, residents are informed that their street will be planted and are provided a description of the selected tree. After planting, another letter encourages watering and seeks support in the form of contributions or a letter to council.

Often cities find creative ways to encourage tree planting. In Hudson, Ohio, contributions may be made for a memorial tree to be planted on the village square. To celebrate their one hundredth anniversary, the Sugarcreek shade tree commission used boy scouts to plant a tree at the high

school.

"A Christmas tree for a park" is one way that Delaware, Ohio obtains trees to plant. In exchange for a tax deductible donation, a potted evergreen is delivered for use as a Christmas tree. After the holidays, the city plants the trees in their parks for all to enjoy. Residents are pleased to know they have helped beautify their city in this manner.

A cooperative tree planting project has proven quite successful in Sugarcreek, Ohio. Using a local club called the Swiss Wheelers, trees that would have been planted by contract were installed by volunteers. This resulted in considerable savings and in effect, allowed the shade tree commission to plant more trees throughout the village.

It is not uncommon to find a civic or service organization that is willing to take on such a project when they recognize the benefits it will derive. The Kiwanis Club in Navarre, Ohio not only purchases seedlings each year for the village nursery but takes an active role in planting and caring for trees on the streets. Using these dedicated individuals saves the village money and fulfills the club's responsibility for civic service.

Public awareness can even be used to accomplish necessary maintenance. Many towns organize pruning parties to spruce up overgrown trees. In downtown Delaware, Ohio, merchants joined in to remove lower limbs that were interfering with pedestrian traffic.

Community services are an integral part of public awareness. Sandusky takes an additional step by preserving several overgrown American Holly trees, in a nursery, as a source of decorations during the holiday season. Sugarcreek's shade tree commission updates urban forestry information at the local library for any interested citizens.

The high cost of energy has made woodburning stoves popular in Ohio. To aid residents, some cities are providing firewood to interested citizens. Orrville and Cambridge, Ohio have allowed interested citizens to remove fallen park trees for a nominal fee. This service has proven very popular with homeowners and saves the city the cost of disposal.

Occasionally a municipal forestry program will do something totally unique to develop public sup-

port. In Sandusky, Ohio, floral displays are constructed on the square to commemorate community events and organizations. They not only stop traffic during the summer but provide an added benefit at the end of the growing season. Residents are allowed to take cuttings from the displays before they are dismantled. This provides direct contact with a city service.

Cincinnati, Ohio started its street tree program in 1978 and has had excellent results. This is partially due to the use of two promotion ideas developed by the city forester. "Mr. Tree" is a fictitious character that promotes city trees through a unique appeal to both children and adults. He has become popular at parades, festivals and at Arbor Day celebrations. "Mr. Tree" regularly adorns the forestry newsletter also. The second promotional device, "Tree of the Week" has been a regular part of the local newspaper. This has helped to make people aware of many native trees. Public awareness of this kind creates an interest in the city's street tree program.

As a pesticide substitute, Toledo, Ohio released ladybugs to combat specific tree pests. A quick thinking city forester expanded this appealing program into a cooperative effort with local schools. Children, dressed as ladybugs, took part in a city wide celebration to help select planting sites for the following year. The resulting success showed the city's sensitivity to controversial issues and its ability to deal effectively with them.

To demonstrate an ongoing street tree program, Westerville, Ohio utilized the bicentennial celebration by involving residents in a contest to choose a favored tree for the city. The winning species has since been promoted as an example of community commitment to their tree program. This is supplemented with slide shows and public speeches to any interested group in the city.

School children were involved in the development of Chardon, Ohio's street tree brochure. A logo contest was held to obtain a design for the brochure and shade tree commission stationery. Winners received prizes from local merchants and the media provided coverage of the event.

Tree planting can even become a matter of pride in one's ancestry. Heritage Park in Lakewood, Ohio has a tree planted for each nationality in the city. This provides a positive

awareness in the cultural differences which exist among neighbors.

With the continual turnover in the population of a city, it's not surprising that many residents are unaware of the laws which cover trees. By consolidating tree policies into a brochure, residents can be kept informed of these rules. Salem, Ohio created their brochure by seeking contributions from local nurseries and garden centers so as to save tax dollars. By adding a list of trees by street to their brochure, Wadsworth, Ohio created a self-guided tour of city trees.

Probably the best rallying point for a municipal forestry program is Arbor Day. Every spring, Ohio cities and villages use a variety of methods to capitalize on this annual event.

The most successful Arbor Day programs involve school children. In 1956, the Wooster shade tree commission, in cooperation with service groups, began distributing potted dogwood trees to all first graders. Since then, over 12,000 have been planted throughout the city. It is not uncommon for a youngster to plant a new tree next to one that their parent received years ago. The program has since been expanded to include fifth graders too. School officials enjoy the favorable image provided by such programs but most importantly the public views trees as positive and beneficial.

The distribution of seedlings for Arbor Day can be successfully done on a large scale. Operating on a grant from the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company, the City of Cleveland's Division of Urban Forestry and the Cleveland City Schools distributed 5,500 trees to the city's fourth graders in 1986. It is anticipated that vandalism will decrease over time because students will better understand the value of trees.

In order to recognize those who have made significant contributions to the beauty of Salem, Ohio, through tree planting, the Salem shade tree commission presents an annual Arbor Day award. During a ceremony at city hall, a personalized certificate is presented to a worthy recipient. With proper radio and newspaper coverage, such recognition serves to perpetuate an appreciation of trees.

A variety of events are used to celebrate Arbor Day in Dover, Ohio. Local merchants display Arbor

Day messages on their signs during April. A display at the local supermarket helps to demonstrate the accomplishments of the program. New parents can receive a seedling to commemorate the birth of a child. A free tree drawing is held at all home football games.

Lisbon, Ohio holds an annual essay and poster contest as part of its Arbor Day celebration. The Shade Tree Commission organizes the event with school officials and merchants fund the prizes. Children receive either a potted seedling or a Tree City USA t-shirt, depending on their level of achievement.

When used in conjunction with an Arbor Day program, the Tree City USA award can be the crowning jewel on a municipal forestry public awareness program. This award, sponsored by the National Arbor Day Foundation, recognizes those municipalities that have reached a predetermined level of competency. Official recognition materials and a meaningful ceremony are ready made for media coverage. It is quite typical for such cities to proudly fly the Tree City USA flag above city hall.

Nine Ohio communities were so recognized in 1980. This figure grew to 86 in just six short years. Earning this award gives residents a source of pride and provides shade tree officials with a defense of their programs.

There are many other public awareness ideas just waiting to be used. For example, a fun run would be an excellent way of turning the jogging craze into a tree planting event. A calendar, displaying street tree scenes, could be sold as a money making project. Renting a sugar maple could develop interest in syrup production while supplying added income.

With the economic constraints facing cities today, urban forestry officials must seek to guarantee a financial commitment from their municipality if they expect to maintain a beneficial tree program. In Ohio and elsewhere, public awareness has proven to be a valuable tool in the justification of tree activities because it develops an interest group which helps to lobby for support.

The possibilities for creating public awareness in any town are virtually endless. Although political environments do vary, none is such as to totally exclude some opportunities. The secret to suc-

cess will only be realized following a commitment by the shade tree commission and/or municipal forest manager. Those that recognize this potential are destined to cash in on the benefits which

only increased public awareness can provide.

4394 W. 168th Street  
Cleveland, Ohio 44135

---

## Abstracts

**ANONYMOUS. 1987. A case study of the gypsy moth.** *Arbor Age* 7(3): 12-13, 16, 18-20, 42-45.

The gypsy moth is a major defoliator of oak trees, birch trees, aspens, willows and others. Primarily it preys on the northeastern United States, but seemingly no area is safe. Early this year they were doing aerial spraying against the moth as far west as the Los Angeles suburb of Encino, CA. A scourge of forests primeval and urban, this deadly little tree pest doesn't always hit town on the wing. It's not too proud to hitch-hike. Some states have set up border inspections to reduce the migration of the gypsy moth by egg masses attached to trucks and campers. Gypsy moths kill trees by defoliating them--but not always. Sometimes recurrent attacks by the gypsies over a period of years, combined with a series of unfortunate circumstances, will result in dead, leafless trees. At other times, given fewer attacks and/or more favorable conditions, the trees will make a comeback. Whether a tree ends up as a cut-off stump or remains a functional, living plant after defoliation depends on how badly it was affected by losing its leaves. This in turn depends on several factors: how much foliage was eaten, whether the tree refoliated, how many years in succession the tree was defoliated, when during the year refoilation occurred, what the weather conditions were after defoliation, if disease organisms and other insects attacked the tree, how healthy or vigorous the tree was before defoliation.

**SHIGO, ALEX L. 1987. Trees and people must communicate--or else!** *Arbor Age* 7(3): 12-14, 16, 18, 20-21.

Making better medicine and more efficient tools is not going to be the complete answer to our problems in arboriculture. We must learn more about the entire system we're working with. We must learn more about trees. For this to happen, communication is necessary--communication from the trees to us, and from us to others. I define communication as transmission of information. This means that information goes from one source to another. And it is understood and accepted, and some action that supports survival takes place. What is information? It is news, intelligence, facts and ideas that are acquired and passed on as knowledge. Information is a message. And a message is the orderly arrangement of items or things. Not only must the arborist learn more about trees, he or she must also inform the public about trees. The right messages must be sent. We have a responsibility that goes far beyond mere public relations. We cannot go out and buy an image. We must acquire it. We have to work for it and earn it.