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Save Our Neighborhoods!

How do we save our neighborhoods? This is a question that has been asked a million times. Some might say, "This is a great suburb, we have nothing to worry about." Others might say, "We have great schools, law enforcement and city government. What could go wrong?" They might be right.... for now. Many great neighborhoods have fallen onto hard times even though things looked good at one time.

So what can a neighborhood do to reduce the chance of future decline? The list is long and many different tactics can work together to keep a neighborhood strong and healthy. Good property maintenance enforcement, good police, maintained roads and infrastructure and good schools are a few that top the list, but there is one tactic that is often forgotten: The street tree.

A street tree can be defined as a tree that is located within 8' of the edge of the roadway. It is an important physical element to every streetscape. All the trees on each street work together to make that street a better feeling and functioning place.

How can street trees help save a neighborhood? Trees are great for many reasons such as: providing shelter for habitat, reducing stormwater runoff,

filtering pollutants and lowering energy costs for the buildings they shade, but those are items for another discussion. Another important benefit of street trees is that they also change how a neighborhood looks and functions. They effect our behavior as residents, as pedestrians and as drivers. They substantially improve the aesthetics and stability of a neighborhood by:

- **Street trees provide a rhythm of trunks along the street to help unify the character of a neighborhood.** Consistently spaced street trees promote a sense of continuity in areas where architectural disparity or poorly maintained properties may exist. When one house is in disrepair, the average passerby will likely not notice because the clean rhythm of trunks keeps the street consistent and uniform.

- **Street trees help to define spaces.** They separate each street into three distinct spaces that can be diagramed with a section cut perpendicular to the road. Each front yard becomes a defined space between the front of the house and the row of street trees. The space between the street trees becomes a defined street corridor. This implied boundary makes the front yard feel more private to the resident and encourages them to use that space, which in turn creates

opportunities for neighbor interaction. Spatial definition also promotes a sense of place and uniqueness within a neighborhood that can be perceived by everyone that travels the roadway.

- **Cars travel at lower speeds when street trees are present.** In a 2006 report, the Transportation Research Board found that street trees provide a sense of place and improve the perception of safety that resulted in a decrease in driving speeds and improved driver performance. The street feels narrower when there are trees lining each side and the negative visual impact of abundant paving is reduced.

- **Street trees provide shade to the roadway and sidewalk, providing a cooler environment for the driver and pedestrian.** They also reduce the heat island effect, essentially cooling the entire neighborhood by up to 5 degrees in the summer. New York City determined that street trees reduce the heat island effect more than any other method, including living roofs. Trees not only reduce temperatures by shading everything below them, but also through transpiration. As the water evaporates from the tree's leaves, it dissipates the heat in and around the tree.

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- **Pedestrians feel safer (and are safer) when street trees are present.** It is best to place the street trees in a 6' to 8' wide lawn area between the street and the sidewalk. This places the pedestrian outside the "street corridor" mentioned above, into the more friendly space on the other side. Also as noted above, the traffic is moving slower, making the roadway more pleasant to the pedestrian. When local residents feel more inclined to walk because of the improved pedestrian environment, they begin to interact with neighbors and they take greater sense of ownership of the neighborhood, making it safer and more stable.

- **Homes located on streets with street trees have greater resale value.** According to the Urban Forest Canopy Report for the City of Portland Oregon, homes with street trees have shown an increase of up to 7% in value comparable to homes on streets without street trees. Several studies in Austin, Texas and New York City show that properties sell for up to 19% more with mature trees and landscaping.

These are some of the reasons street trees are so important, but how should we be designing our street tree planting to make it the most effective?

In order to create the spatial definition and rhythm of trunks needed for a successful streetscape, it is important to place trees reasonably close together. Distances from 25' to 40' are recommended and can be adjusted to accommodate driveways, hydrants and street lights. It is also recommended that an entire street (or block) be planted in one species. This helps to keep the texture and form of the tree massing consistent along the corridor. To

address concerns about monoculture, be sure to use each species sparingly, to ensure that the larger neighborhood has a good diversity of tree species. The parkway between the sidewalk and curb should be 6'-8' wide (though 5' is manageable, if existing) to give the tree ample space to grow and reduce pavement damage as much as possible. Street trees should not be planted beyond 6' from the curb, with 3'-5' being the preferred distance. Planting trees any further into the yard only dilutes the tree's effectiveness for all the items listed above, and they then become yard trees, not street trees.

These recommendations are not the conditions a horticulturist typically prefers, but this is what must be done for good urban (and suburban) design. Great street tree plantings are about good horticulture mixed with good architecture. The two must make compromises in order to create the best design possible.

Selecting appropriate trees for our region is also important. Good selections for most street tree applications include:

- Metro Gold Hedge Maple (*Acer campestre* 'Panacek')
- State Street Miyabe Maple (*Acer miyabei* 'Morton')
- Caddo Southern Sugar Maple (*Acer saccharum* 'Caddo')
- Turkish Filbert (*Corylus colurna*)
- Hardy Rubber Tree (*Eucommia ulmoides*)
- Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*) -male varieties
- Seedless Kentucky Coffeetree (*Gymnocladus dioicus* 'Expresso')
- Dawn Redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*)
- Bloodgood Planetree (*Platanus x acerifolia* 'Bloodgood')
- White Oak (*Quercus alba*)
- Swamp White Oak (*Quercus bicolor*)
- Bur Oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*)
- Cherrybark Oak (*Quercus pagodifolia*)
- Red Oak (*Quercus rubra*)
- Shumard Oak (*Quercus shumardii*)

- Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*)
- Sterling Silver Linden (*Tilia tomentosa* 'Princeton')
- Valley Forge American Elm (*Ulmus americana* 'Valley Forge')
- Allee Lacebark Elm (*Ulmus parvifolia* 'Emerald Vase')
- Emerald Sunshine Elm (*Ulmus x 'Emerald Sunshine'*)
- Accolade Elm (*Ulmus x 'Accolade'*)
- Japanese Zelkova (*Zelkova serrata* 'Green Vase')

A recently built neighborhood has had little time to decline. But in 20 or 30 years, some neighborhoods will begin to show signs of instability and social decline. Studies have shown that if a neighborhood has mature street trees as it begins to age, it would have a much better chance for continued stability and will not become a headache for the city, the police and the school system.

Every city and neighborhood association would be wise to develop a program for all it's neighborhood's to plant street trees in areas that do not have them, old and new, to help them stop their visual and social decline. Who would have ever thought that something as simple as a street tree could be so important?

Plant a street tree; Save a neighborhood.



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