

Listening to the Trees

Don McSween isn't in heaven yet, but he's listening. As Charlotte's city arborist, he listens every day to politicians, civic leaders, business owners, homeowners, and colleagues. Though they come from varied walks of life, all share a common goal—to preserve the status of this bustling, burgeoning North Carolina city as a haven for beautiful trees.

At first glance, Charlotte's trees seem to have a secure future. Indeed, a simple morning's walk beneath the magnificent green cathedral of willow oaks that tower above Queens Road West

may be one of the most inspiring walks of your life. Yet urban trees face challenges that their brethren in the wild never know. Daily they struggle against air pollution, compacted soil, vandalism, and wayward vehicles. And they frequently lose vital roots to trenching machines that carve underground passages for utility lines. As Don notes, "A trencher can kill a giant old oak in one afternoon."

Why pine for city trees? The reasons are obvious. Franklin D. Roosevelt correctly termed trees "the lungs of our land." Trees purify the air by releasing oxygen while absorbing carbon dioxide and other air pollutants. They also cool the air and muffle noise. And their mere existence increases a property's value by 10% to 15%.

Don't overlook the psychological value of trees, Don reminds. Healthy trees build pride in a neighborhood.

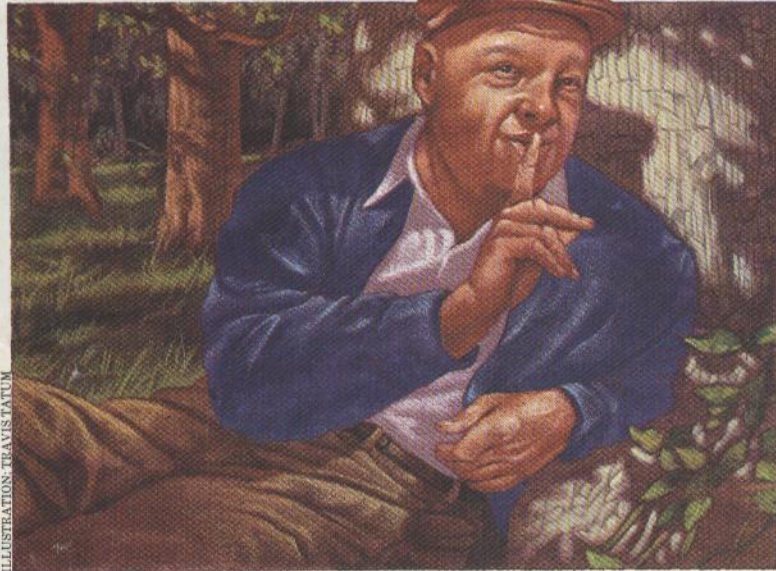


ILLUSTRATION: TRAVIS TATUM

Trees are the earth's endless effort to speak to the listening heaven.

—Rabindranath Tagore, *Fireflies*

They make us feel good about our homes and ourselves, an effect manifested in even the poorest communities. "When you take a neighborhood that feels ignored and plant trees, put in new sidewalks and curbing, and in general show interest in that community, you see a change in attitude of the community about themselves," he observes. "People stop littering and start planting flowers. They paint their houses, mow their lawns, and the neighborhood looks a lot better."

Today several million trees reside within Charlotte's limits. This urban forest needs expert managing every bit as much as its counterpart in a national park. Don encourages property owners to devote equal time to maintaining existing trees as to planting new ones. He promotes the planting of many different species because genetic diversity helps the forest naturally fend off insects and

disease. And he advocates planting hundreds of new trees each year, so that the city's trees don't all grow old and die at the same time.

An effective tree ordinance, developed in cooperation with homeowners, businesspeople, developers, and landscape architects, assists the efforts of Don and his colleagues. It does not affect any trees on private property around single-family homes. But it does protect trees growing on city property and street rights-of-way, as well as those

on commercial and multifamily properties between a right-of-way and the setback for the buildings.

Don views his mission as both providing and conserving a vital legacy for future generations. "I tell people all the time—you're planting trees not just for your children, but also for your grandchildren," he says. This doesn't mean the planters can't admire the fruits of their labor. "You may not see 90-foot-tall trees with 48-inch-thick trunks in your lifetime," he admits. Then he quickly adds, "But you'd be surprised how fast trees can grow. I planted an oak in my backyard 18 years ago. Today it's 50 feet tall."

So if you find yourself in Charlotte one day, take a walk down Queens Road West and enjoy the forest. You may run into Don. Don't expect him to speak to you right away, however. He's probably listening—listening to the trees.

Steve Bender