

LEAF'S Toronto Tree Tours – An Urban Perspective

by Susan Gulley

What comes to mind when you hear the word "forest"? For me, it evokes many vibrant images from the dense, dark evergreens of the boreal to the delicate, cathedral-like hardwoods of the Carolinian. Since joining Local Enhancement and Appreciation of Forests (LEAF) in November 2007, my vision has expanded to include a unique system known as the urban forest.

There are an estimated 7,000,000 trees in the City of Toronto on both public and private land. Although I had admired many of them as magnificent, resilient individuals, I had never viewed them as a whole. I could not see the urban forest for the trees. I now heartily embrace the concept that, collectively, these trees form a connected and complex ecosystem with its own characteristics and challenges; one that cannot be divided by property lines. This appealing perspective implies that the urban forest is a shared resource and, therefore, a shared responsibility.

LEAF is a Toronto-based non-profit organization that has developed several programs to actively involve people in local urban forest stewardship. We envision Toronto as a city where every citizen cares for the urban forest. Our Backyard Tree Planting Program offers native trees and shrubs to property owners at a subsidized cost. Since 1996, we have planted over 11,000 trees in backyards across the city. Our Tree Tenders program provides arboriculture training for those interested in starting

Plant Rescues

Volunteers needed to participate in three plant rescues of spring ephemerals in May (dates to be announced) in Tottenham, Ontario (and then another one of meadow/prairie plants in June). To find out more e-mail rescues@nanps.org.



LEAF's Todd Irvine guides tree lovers on a Tree Tour in Deer Park with a white oak (*Quercus alba*) as a backdrop.

their own community projects or for anyone who just wants to learn more.

LEAF is also reaching out to a new and diverse audience through Toronto Tree Tours, a program run in collaboration with the Toronto Public Space Committee. Todd Irvine, LEAF's Education and Outreach Co-ordinator, uses the tours as a forum to raise such fundamental questions as, "Who is caring for the existing trees in the urban forest and what can we do to ensure their longevity?"

Guided walking tours are given in discrete neighbourhoods throughout the city. Each tree tour involves 12 to 15 stops where local residents tell stories of individual trees and tour leaders use living examples to illustrate the benefits and challenges of the urban forest. On a Toronto Tree Tour, we may wander down a back alley to discover a black walnut (*Juglans nigra*), stroll neighbourhood streets to find surviving white elm (*Ulmus americana*) or newly planted Kentucky coffeetrees

(*Gymnocladus dioica*), or become mesmerized by prairie grasses and wildflowers growing on downtown rooftops.

Several of our tours have been profiled on the Tree Tours website and more will be added throughout the year. Maps, photos, directions and stories allow you to take the tours virtually or print them out and guide yourself around. Tree stops such as "The saddest tree", "A tale of two alleys" or "More dangerous than it looks" are not only entertaining but address the prevalent issues in each neighbourhood.

Through the Tree Tours, we hope to strengthen community pride by helping local residents recognize the value of the trees in their neighbourhoods and by highlighting the work of many dedicated community groups.

2008 is shaping up to be our best year yet. Starting in May, we will be taking our Tree Tours to all corners of the city with tours planned around the Rouge Valley, Samuel Smith Park, the Annex, Cedarvale Ravine and Teesdale-Dentonia, to name just a few. Come out and learn more about our tenacious urban forest this year.

Susan Gulley is LEAF's Tree Tours Co-ordinator. If you want to be added to the Tree Tours Alert List or discuss a tree tour in your neighbourhood, email her at susan@leafontario.org or visit www.treetours.to. If you wish to schedule a tree planting or want to learn more about LEAF's other programs, visit www.leafontario.org.



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