
ARBOR VITAE

NEWSLETTER OF TREES FOR CAPITOL HILL, INC. 2026 Issue



2025 Fall Tree Planting

Beth Purcell, President, TFCH

Trees for Capitol Hill (TFCH) continues to augment Capitol Hill's tree canopy in cooperation with the Urban Forestry Division (UFD) within the District's Department of Transportation (DDOT). Our volunteers are working toward the shared goal of adding diversity to our urban forest. Planting a wide range of tree species along our streets ensures that some trees will survive if a species-specific disease or infestation appears, e.g., Dutch elm disease or emerald ash borer. This diversity also serves an educational purpose -- the UFD is helping educate residents by leaving the ID tags on recently planted trees. Photos and detailed descriptions are available online: ddot.dc.gov/page/ddot-urban-forestry.

We planted street trees at these locations in November 2025: A Sterling Silver Linden (*Tilia tomentosa* 'Sterling') at 800 Massachusetts Avenue, NE, a Japanese Snowbell (*Styrax japonicus*), at 144 11th Street, NE, a Soulfire Dawn Redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) opposite 143 13th Street, NE, a Princeton Gingko (*Ginkgo biloba*) at 1314 Constitution Avenue, NE, and a Chinese Standard Fringetree (*Chionanthus retusus*) 1318 Constitution Avenue, NE. All of these trees have been "adopted" by nearby home owners who are keeping them well watered.

A bit of a twist this year... An enormous honey locust died, in the back yard of a TFCH volunteer. As a heritage tree (circumference > 100"), it required UFD approval for removal – and a team of experts, a very tall crane and a chainsaw blade as tall as the man operating it. To ease their sadness at its demise, the owners planned to place one of the smaller sections in the Maury ES yard, for the kids to enjoy. But how to get it there? It was so heavy that they couldn't budge it. Enter Tony Lopez, the Merrifield Garden Center driver. An expert at man-handling large objects, he skillfully guided it onto his ball cart, and down the alley to his truck, then on to the school where it now generates joy instead of sorrow. And neighbors with a wood-turning hobby carved several bowls from other sections.



We are very grateful for the help of our volunteers on planting day. We're planning to be "back at it" on November 21, 2026. our traditional Saturday-before-Thanksgiving planting date. Mark it on your calendar; we'll send a recruitment email when it gets closer to the time.

If you'd like to suggest a planting location on public property, let us know soon, so we can get approval from our friends at the UFD. We ask that tree-requesters prepare the hole, assist with the planting, and agree to water the tree for at least the first two summers. And check out our Friends & Family program (page 7), if you have room for a tree on your own property.





Does the Natural Environment Have the Legal Right to Exist, Thrive, and Be Protected?

Mark Grace,, Vice-President/Treasurer, TFCH

- From the New York Times: July 1, 2026 *Who Speaks for the Trees? A Tiny Quebec Town.*

Does granting rights to nature threaten humanity's ability to extract resources for development?

Presently, nature is considered property in legal systems and is treated as such; exploitable according to the desires of its "owner". But there is a growing movement for the very right of being in nature; and that people should be able to sue on behalf of nature - such as trees - for their existence and importantly, the right to thrive. That is, that nature possesses legally enforceable rights, including the most basic right, the right to exist..

For example, last year the small Canadian town of Terrasse-Vaudreuil adopted a legal resolution to protect its trees. The town mayor called the trees "indispensable allies," and that the town recognizes that trees, as living beings, have the right to exist, thrive and receive protections in the law. Terrasse-Vaudreuil is the first to adopt the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Trees, a declaration recognizing that trees have distinct legal rights. Drafted in France in 2018 and 2019, it mandates that humanity "act with the Tree in a spirit of fraternity and solidarity". With wide voter support, the town of Terrasse-Vaudreuil formally acknowledged that trees are a collective asset. The mayor declared, "Today, we affirm that trees are not merely a backdrop in our community. They are indispensable allies for our health, our climate resilience, and our quality of life."

For trees to have legal rights is a concept foreign to many, an outrage to others. Wesley J. Smith, a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute's Center on Human Exceptionalism, argues that the nature rights movement is a "subversive ideology". The arguments are that it is conceptually flawed and impractical as there is no clear boundaries to nature with its multiples of overlapping ecosystems (how do you separate the rights of trees from those of air and water rights?). Or, that it can be considered an imposition of legal standards from colonizers on indigenous peoples/traditional cultures, those who use the natural environment in ways different from modern ways. Ultimately the argument is that it has the potential to stall necessary human development.

Still, the movement has captured attention of lawmakers. This month, a bill was introduced in the British Parliament to recognize the rights of nature. More than three dozen communities in the United States, and a handful in Canada, Mexico, Peru, Australia, Ireland, and Northern Ireland have adopted laws or nonbinding resolutions recognizing such rights. Ecuador enshrined rights of nature in its Constitution in 2008. Laws and court rulings have begun to enforce that nature possesses legally enforceable rights.

So, what are your thoughts on trees and nature having legal rights?

Succession Planting

Elizabeth Nelson, Vice-President/Treasurer, TFCH

TFCH members have been fostering saplings in their backyards, until they're sturdy enough to survive in public. The most recent transplant is a pecan tree (*Carya illinoensis*, var. *kanzā*), a "twin" to the one planed last year in the triangle park bounded by the 1300 blocks of North Carolian Ave. and A St. NE. The newbie is in the same park, tucked under a majestic elm. Sad to say, the elm may be nearing the end of its lifespan despite the best efforts of its hosts. The hope is that when the elm eventually "sheds its mortal coil", the pecan will be well established and prepared to step into the ecological niche.



2026 Tree of the Year - Sourwood

Elizabeth Nelson, Vice-President/Treasurer, TFCH

The 2026 Tree of the Year is the notoriously fickle sourwood (*Oxydendrum arboreum*), also known as the Lily-of-the-Valley tree or Sorrel tree. This heart-breaker is shade tolerant and native to the southeastern United States. It is most common in the lower chain of the [Appalachian Mountains](#). It does well in a woodland habitat, preferring moist, well-drained, and organic-rich soil. But it resists transplanting and frequently disappoints those who want one as a street tree.

Among the “fanciest” trees in the forest, it is known for its gorgeous red-purple fall color, and white, fragrant flowers that attract bees. In summer, Sourwood honey is highly prized for its unique flavor. Juice from its blooms is used to make sourwood jelly. The shoots were used by the Cherokee and the Catawba, to make arrow-shafts. The trees are slow growing and top out around 25-30 ft.

We could not find a specimen on Capitol Hill, although there are a few near the Asian garden in the US National Arboretum. However, we expect to plant one on private property this fall, where it can be carefully tended and the soil well-prepared, in advance. If it makes it, we'll show it off in a future newsletter.



Stunning fall foliage



Summer blooms

A Tree of One's Own - Expanding “Friends & Family” Program

Elizabeth Nelson, Vice-President/Treasurer, TFCH

At the time TFCH was founded in 1991, the District's finances were in shambles and there was no budget for planting street trees. TFCH stepped into the void; many of the mature trees shading our streets were given their start by TFCH volunteers. Now that the Urban Forestry Division of DDoT is successfully fulfilling this need; nearly all the tree spaces in their purview have been planted. Our UFD arborists have pointed out that, to get the canopy coverage necessary to protect the environment, we need more trees on private property.

TFCH will continue to plant in public space, but we're expanding our program to assist neighbors wanting trees (or shrubs) for their own yards. Participants are required to prepare a hole on their property and pay the cost of the tree (at TFCH's discounted price) plus a prorated share of the shipping costs. TFCH selects a specimen of the preferred species at the nursery, purchases the tree, arranges delivery and assists in planting. These trees are quite large, usually 1-2" caliper, and not inexpensive. Still, they are typically a more mature tree than what individuals could bring home and plant by themselves; the discount makes them more affordable; and shipping and installation costs are lower than if purchased directly from a nursery. If interested, email elizabeth_knits@yahoo.com with 'Friends & Family Tree' in the subject line. There's no real deadline but most likely we'll do “the big shop” at Merrifield Garden Center in late August or early September.

Not quite sure what you want? Check out the “plant finder” at missouribotanicalgarden.org. The climate in Missouri is very similar to the Washington metro area and the advice offered by this website has proven quite reliable for plant choices on Capitol Hill.

UFD Arborists

Elizabeth Nelson, Vice-President/Treasurer, TFCH

Former Ward 6 Arborist, Steve McKindley-Ward has been sighted in the National Arboretum. He's fine and flourishing and enjoying his retirement. Jack Chapman is our current contact.

The District of Columbia has, under its Department of Transportation (DDOT), an Urban Forestry Division (UFD). TFCH works with the Ward 6 Arborists, receiving advice on tree selection, site planting, permits and maintenance, and on-going care. We help promote the UFD mission of greater public understanding and connection to the urban tree canopy. The UFD has created an interactive portal (trees.dc.gov) that helps residents understand the urban forest that surrounds us.

Ways you can help:

- If you suspect Special and/or Heritage Trees (44" and 100" circumference, respectively) are being removed illegally, call the UFD office at: 202-673-6813 and ask for the “arborist on duty” because it is time-sensitive.
- Water young trees during their first three summers.
- Learn and spread the word about the DC Municipal Regulations “Beautification of Tree

Spaces”** inappropriate and “tree-hurtful” practices by uninformed residents. Report violations to 3-1-1.



Snowcrete” sculptures at Kentucky Ave. and South Carolina Ave. SE, February 2026

** a synopsis of the regulations appears on page 6

Please Water Trees

Beth Purcell, President, TFCH

We are fortunate to have received so many new street trees this year, both through our own efforts and those of the Urban Forestry Division (UFD). A good tip for spotting the “newbies” is to look for stakes with wires attached to them; they should be sporting a green “tree-gator” tree-watering bag.

- These trees will need supplemental water for at least their first three summers if they are to survive.
- The District government plans to water their plantings twice a month - but only for the first year. Even if they follow this schedule, there may not be enough water so we all need to help. We estimate that it costs less than \$10 to water a tree for an entire summer

A quick blast from a hose encourages poor root development. Instead, let the water trickle for 20 to 30 minutes – or better still, use a watering bag or basin. A garden hose connected to a nearby water source makes this job easy and it provides a useful way to measure the amount of water you are delivering.

- Fill the green tree-gator bag once a week. The water will gradually drip out over 24-48 hours. The hole for the hose is a slit under the paper tag at the top of the bag. See how-to water video on www.caseytrees.org.
- Watering basins are a good alternative but can be difficult to find. The advantages are that they are easier to fill with a bucket, where hoses won’t reach; and they aren’t easily damaged by mowers. The disadvantage is that the holes may become clogged, preventing the water from draining into the ground. In very light rain, they can block water from reaching the tree. If not properly drained, they can also become a mosquito breeding ground.
- If there has been less than 1.5 inches of rain in the last week, new trees need water. Check the “Watering Alerts” on www.caseytrees.org.

The trees will need an absolute minimum of 10 gallons each week from spring bloom until winter freeze - but as much as 20-30 gallons may be needed in very hot, dry weather. Even if you think that Mother Nature has been providing enough rain, it doesn’t pay to be over-confident. By the time a tree looks like it needs water (is shriveled or drops leaves), it has already been damaged. Don’t wait. Be proactive!

Mulch is also important in keeping a tree hydrated. A 2-4 inch layer is sufficient but the mulch must be kept away from the trunk. Cleaning weeds and debris from the planting space helps in two ways. First, the tree will not have to compete with the weeds for precious water. Second, water bags are far less likely to be punctured by mowers if there is no vegetation to mow.

TFCH has a few bags and basins that can be borrowed for the season. If you want one, contact Elizabeth Nelson, Elizabeth_knits@yahoo.com.

Service requests for tree inspection/removal/replanting can be made at 311.dc.gov or by calling 311. Making the request on-line is preferable because it creates a record of your request. You can create an account or login as a guest. This is a direct link to the “All Service Types” menu, which includes several tree related options: 311.dc.gov/citizen/servicetypes/all.



Treegators are easiest to fill by hose



Jack Montgomery and Margaret Missiaen filling Treegator with bucket



No hose? Basins may be easier to fill

Preventing Mower Damage to Tree Bark

Elizabeth Nelson, Vice-President/Treasurer, TFCH

It's Biology 101; damage to the bark is harmful, if not fatal, to the tree. The tree's "circulatory system" is located in the cambium layer between the wood and the outer bark. Unfortunately, the contractors hired by the District government to mow public greenspaces, seem unaware. All too often they run the blades of the mowers into the trunk of the tree. If the tree is lucky, it may be just a nick; all too often, a chunk of bark is torn off or the tree is completely girdled. In most cases, the wound will not heal over. The tree may survive the initial attack but will not thrive, as it would have with intact bark. Trees in areas that are maintained by residents are at less risk because their neighbors are looking out for them and also because lawn mowers for home use have recessed blades. However, even these trees can be damaged through inattention.

Plastic trunk-protectors are very helpful and inexpensive, and they should be used whenever possible. But they are not fool proof; they too are easily shredded by high powered mowers. Keeping weeds and tall grass away from tree trunks reduces the temptation to mow too close. It is recommended that a wide circle of mulch be used, as it discourages unwanted vegetation and preserves moisture. Best of all, it keeps those mowers away from the trees. But be sure to arrange it in a "donut" shape to keep it way from the trunk where it may create habitat for damaging insects. To request a bark protector from TFCH, email Elizabeth_knits@yahoo.com with 'bark protector' in the subject line.



Plastic bark protector



Arranging mulch away from the trunk



Dead tree was girdled by a mower just above the root flare

Donations Appreciated!

The generosity of our neighbors allows us to continue the work of keeping our neighborhood green and the streets tree-lined. Donations are fully tax-deductible. To make a contribution, send a check made out to "Trees for Capitol Hill" to 1330 North Carolina Ave., NE, Washington, DC 20002.

Tree Space Beautification Best Practices

Steve Kehoe, reprinted courtesy of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society (CHRS)

Residents are encouraged to adhere to these best practices, which will contribute to the robust growth and general health of Capitol Hill's public space trees.

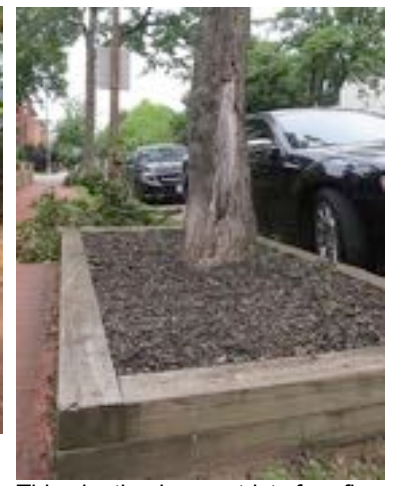
DO	DON'T
If adding soil amendments or replacing some soil in a tree space, work must be done prior to tree planting. After planting, only periodic light cultivation is advised.	Never try to replace soil around a tree after it has been planted. Trying to replace soil around a tree usually results in a dead tree within 1 or 2 years—particularly for trees that are just becoming established.
Mulching around a tree is encouraged, as is watering new trees when rainfall is less than 1 inch per week. New trees need 10 - 20 gallons of water once a week from spring bloom until winter freeze. Second- and third-year trees need 20 - 40 gallons per week.	Don't use gravel as a groundcover or deposit soil to increase the grade of a tree space. Both are prohibited (24 DCMR 109.10). Piling on additional soil exposes the tree bark to soil borne diseases and robs the roots of oxygen.
Any temporary barrier or fencing must allow the free flow of rainwater from the sidewalk into the tree space. This applies to permanent tree fences too. DC Dept. of Transportation (DDOT) requires a \$50 permit for a permanent tree fence (24 DCMR 225.1(h)).	Don't install any solid border or edging around a tree space. This practice prevents or impedes the flow of rainwater from the sidewalk into the tree space. DDOT has been enlarging tree spaces in an effort to increase the amount of rainwater runoff available to trees.
Limit plantings to annual or perennial plants having a shallow root system and a mature height of no more than 18 inches tall.	Don't use plants that grow via a deep root system, spread by underground shoots or runners, that climb or intertwine, or that are invasive.
Acceptable plants include perennials such as <u>variegated</u> Liriope, Ferns, Hostas, Dusty Miller, Yarrow, Sedums, Black-Eyed Susan, and flowering annuals that grow no more than 18 inches tall. Plants should be at least 2 feet from the tree trunk.	Don't plant bamboo and <u>dark green</u> Liriope, which spread by underground shoots to form an impenetrable root layer, or English Ivy, which climbs. Vegetable plants are not flowers and are prohibited (24 DCMR 109.11).



Excessive shrubbery crowds the tree stealing nutrients and water



Raising the soil level will smother the roots and kill the tree



This planting box restricts free flow of rainwater, raises the soil level and creates a tripping hazard

Trees For Capitol Hill, Inc.
1330 North Carolina Ave., NE
Washington, DC 20002

Redbud “pom poms” – hard to believe it’s all natural!



Trees For Capitol Hill



Who we are:
Trees for Capitol, Inc., a DC nonprofit corporation founded in 1991, is dedicated to enhancing our neighborhood by planting and caring for trees in public spaces. Our funding comes from generous grants from the Capitol Hill Community Foundation, the National Capital Bank and individual donors. We are a 501(c)(3) corporation.

To make a contribution, send a check made out to “Trees for Capitol Hill” to 1330 North Carolina Ave., NE, Washington, DC 20002

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