

Wyomissing's Urban Forest – A New Generation

It is a time of transition for the street tree population in the Borough of Wyomissing. It appears we are seeing the decline and demise of the first generation of shade trees, planted mostly in the early and mid-20th century, at the same time we are observing the growth and development of the younger, more vigorous trees planted as replacements from the early 1990's to the present day. The sight of so many large, mature trees disappearing from along the streets of the Borough in the past decade or so can certainly be alarming to many people, but residents can be assured that the process is not haphazard or arbitrary, and that each removal is thoroughly considered.

The tradition and practice of planting trees along roads in this country began shortly after the arrival of European settlers in the seventeenth century, the original impetus most likely to provide cooling shade to citizens and horses alike, but perhaps also to define the avenues and walkways in an orderly way. We now know that trying to grow trees far from their native woodland habitat close to everyday human activity subjects them to damage and stresses they did not evolve to deal with. Through history, as U.S. villages, towns and cities grew and developed, planting street trees remained an important aspect of urban design. Unfortunately, the life of urban trees only got tougher with the burgeoning human population, the advent of automobiles, larger and taller buildings and the invention of long lasting but impenetrable paving materials – modern-day asphalt and concrete.

Today, what we refer to as street trees, urban trees or community trees are usually planted in the area between curbs and sidewalks, commonly called the planting strip or tree lawn. The width of these strips, as well as proximity to utilities and buildings, has a huge impact on the health and lifespan of the trees planted there. All trees require a large area of rooting space where they can utilize the soil volume necessary to get all of the water, organic matter and nutrients they need to grow and prosper. In the forest or countryside, trees' root systems can easily extend over twice the distance of its branch spread. This is rarely the case in a built-up urban environment. Curbs, sidewalks and building foundations block the progress of growing roots preventing them from finding and using the water and nutrients needed in larger quantities as the trees establish and grow larger. Compounding the difficulty is the fact that most urban soils are far from optimum for growing trees. They are often compacted from heavy use and traffic, low in nutrient content and high in discarded building materials – bricks, rock and cement. This is where most tree problems and stresses originate – under the ground. When a tree can't get what it needs to fulfill its energy budget, its natural defense mechanisms often shut down, making it vulnerable to secondary attack from insect pests and diseases.

Nationwide, studies have estimated the average lifespan of a street tree at about ten to twelve years. Remarkably, Wyomissing's trees do much better than this, with many now probably pushing the century mark. We can thank the founders, who from day one considered trees a vital part of the town's infrastructure. Ahead of their time, they composed an ordinance and a list of rules and regulations, effectively giving the Borough full control of all trees in the right-of-way, forever protecting them from arbitrary removal or damage and insuring that only trained and experienced professional arborists would be caring for them into the future.

Since 1992, Wyomissing's Tree Department has maintained a complete computerized inventory of every tree under the Borough's control. As of the end of 2022, there are 7,612 trees in this inventory. Our database contains a complete profile of each tree, listing location, species, size and condition and allows us to keep detailed records including inspections, work histories and residents' requests. The software also gives us the ability to generate reports and lists, for example, lists of priority removals, young trees needed to be trained or citizens' communications. We upload and back up new data daily, assuring that the information is as accurate and current as possible.

As mentioned earlier, Wyomissing's trees are at a kind of crossroads. Even given the amount and quality of attention and care they have received, many of the oldest trees in the Borough are reaching the end of their useful lives, losing vigor, dying back and often quickly becoming hazardous. The age threshold of 80 to 100 years is being met by an increasing number of trees, especially the stately Boulevard oaks, which are probably the oldest in the Borough. The decision to remove a tree is never an easy one or something we ever take lightly. Obviously, the first and most important criterion is the overall condition of the tree which includes the number of large dead branches, presence of visible decay on the trunk or major limbs or structural defects like large cracks or splits at major branch attachments. Any or all of these conditions can be temporarily corrected to buy some time for the tree but it is fairly obvious to us when the decline is past the point of no return. Trees that may still seem viable may be subject to other considerations, including direction and extent of lean or signs of root damage or decay. After we place a tree on our removal list, we schedule it on our in-house work list or include it on a tree contractor bid request which we send out three to four times per year.

We replace virtually every tree we remove the following year except on the rare occasion that there is a compelling reason not to (too close to an intersection, conflict with trees or landscaping on private property, interference with underground utilities). Despite the fact that we consistently plant more trees than we lose each year, we are in a time of reduced tree canopy because it takes decades for young trees to grow and fill the space of the tree that was lost. Naturally, this will turn around as our younger trees grow into the grand giants which Wyomissing is known for. Our crop of younger trees may even have a better chance at reaching that goal than their predecessors did. We employ an intensive pruning program which involves visiting every tree we plant at one to two year intervals for the first ten to twelve years to train them to a sound form and structure, greatly reducing the chance of structural failure in the future. We are also working on diversifying species to eliminate major pest or disease outbreaks and encouraging an attractive and resilient urban forest for Wyomissing's future.

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