

Branch out and celebrate National Tree Day

Toronto's forests worth \$7 billion says new tree canopy study



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Ben Cullen photo

Warming up for National Tree Day, columnist Mark Cullen points out that the average density of trees in Toronto is 16,000 a square kilometre — or four trees per person.

By: [Mark Cullen](#) Gardening, Published on Fri Sep 12 2014

Next time you take a breath, be sure to thank a tree. The numbers are in and they are impressive. We can stop arguing over the importance of a healthy urban tree canopy and devote more time to celebrating heritage trees, and planting and protecting urban trees. Based on new research, I believe that it is time to elevate the discussion.

TD Urban Tree Study: This past spring, the TD Bank published a much ballyhooed study on urban trees that deserves our attention. If you didn't get a chance to read it, let me summarize the salient points for you:

- The City of Toronto urban forests are worth an estimated \$7 billion or \$700 per (mature) tree.
- Toronto residents benefit by an average of \$8 per tree in environmental benefits and cost savings (\$80 million, total).
- For every dollar spent on tree maintenance, the urban forest returns \$1.35 to \$3.20 worth of benefits and cost savings each year.

It may interest you that there are 116 tree and shrub species in the Toronto urban forest, that it covers nearly 30 per cent of the city (when viewed from the sky) and that the average density of trees in the city is 16,000 per square kilometre — or four trees per person.

Note that the greatest density of trees is in our valley lands and public green spaces.

The TD study touches on important issues like air quality and water preservation, carbon storage and property values (of interest to every property owner, I should think). I will get back to this in a moment.

U.S. numbers: An expansive American study is equally informing and impressive for its massive scale. In May, the U.S. Forest Service published the first-ever national study of the effects of trees on human health. No other scientific study has been quite this thorough. Here are some fascinating numbers (all figures U.S.):

- 17.4 million tonnes of air pollution were removed by trees in the U.S. in 2010, with the human health effects being valued at \$6.8 billion.
- Pollution removed by trees from urban areas in one year equals \$4.7 billion.
- Each year, 850 lives are saved, thanks to the environmental benefits of trees — mostly due to a reduction in respiratory disease. In one year there are more than 670,000 fewer acute respiratory symptoms among urban dwellers.
- In 2010 there were 17 million trees removed from urban areas.

According to the U.S. Forest Service authors, “In terms of impacts on human health, trees in urban areas are substantially more important than rural trees due to their proximity to people.” Scientists, I find, can sometimes be masters of stating the obvious. This is one weighty paper, with over 80 references to support it.

The point is this: we need to learn to live with trees and we need more of them.

National Tree Day: Next Wednesday, Sept. 24, is National Tree Day, made so by act of Canadian Parliament.

What does that mean exactly? Well, it means that we really need to stop and think about what we are going to do to enhance our green urban environment.

Perhaps the easiest thing for homeowners to do is plant a tree. Find a place in your yard where a tree can serve a special purpose. Be selfish about it and think about the shade of a leaf-bearing tree (deciduous) on the west or south side of your home to cool it and reduce the need for summer-time air conditioning.

An evergreen (coniferous) tree on the west or north side of your home will reduce the cooling impact of winter winds and save you heating costs. A large shrub that shades your air conditioner will save up to 15 per cent% in air conditioning costs, as well.

Thinking outside the box: A fruiting tree, like an apple, pear or cherry tree, will produce fruit and provide you and your family with nutritious food in season. Many native trees provide fruit that attracts birds and other wildlife. A serviceberry can be treated as a large shrub or trained as a tree with annual pruning. It flowers early in the spring and is essentially insect- and disease-free. I love this native shrub-tree for its versatility: it grows in sun or partial shade and in a wide variety of soil conditions.

No house? Not everyone lives on real estate that provides the opportunity to plant trees. Consider, then, joining the many volunteer organizations that are committed to enhancing the urban tree canopy.

- LEAF. A not-for-profit organization that is dedicated to planting trees on private property around the Toronto. Look them up online and learn how to become an advocate for many of the trees in your neighbourhood, and how to “adopt a tree” through the program by the same name. Go to www.yourleaf.org.
- Park People. There is a lot of activity going on in the public green spaces in Toronto. Go to www.parkpeople.ca and check out the many programs that you can participate in on a volunteer basis. What a great way to get to know some new, like-minded people!
- Ontario Urban Forest Council. This group of passionate tree people provides guest speakers on the topic of the urban forest, educational seminars and an annual symposium. www.oufc.org
- Forests Ontario. Dedicated to reforesting Ontario’s green areas in rural and urban lands, Forests Ontario is made up of 85 partner organizations.

Recently, Forest Ontario published a paper on tree planting and the survey revealed that 88 per cent of Ontarians believe that tree planting and better forest management practices are key in reducing the risks of climate change. This is *such* good news since it indicates =the message about the environmental benefits of trees is getting out there. We just need to work on the other 12 per cent.

Forests Ontario CEO, Rob Keen, asks the significant and insightful question: “Why is it important that our province’s youth build a strong connection to nature and our forests?” Perhaps the answer to that one is fodder for a future column.

Heritage trees: Within our urban forest, many believe that our heritage trees — those storied, weathered trees — are best of all. Valued for their tenacity and longevity, heritage trees offer a sense of place, are a living link to our past and, while not always beautiful, are certainly determined survivors. Their seed stock is prized because it contains valuable genetic material.

The Ontario Urban Forest Council and Forests Ontario have developed a Provincial Heritage Tree Program to recognize socially and historically significant trees. You can locate these on the Forests Ontario website where you can also submit an application for a tree you believe deserves to be celebrated and cherished. Please visit www.forestsontario.ca for more information.

Personally, I have enjoyed watching more than 2,000 trees grow on our property since 2006. Almost nothing compares to the joy that I feel when I measure the progress that each one of them has made in eight short

Craig Alexander, chief economist at TD, concludes their urban trees study with these words: “Maintaining our urban forests makes sense, as every dollar spent on maintenance returns \$1.35 to \$3.20 worth of benefits to residents of the City of Toronto. The cost of savings produced by our urban forests make it clear that keeping the green on our street, keeps the green in our wallets.”

It is comforting to know — regardless of what motivates you to plant a tree, maintain one or celebrate an old tree — that our commitment to a healthy tree canopy is one that we can take to the bank.

Happy National Tree Day.

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