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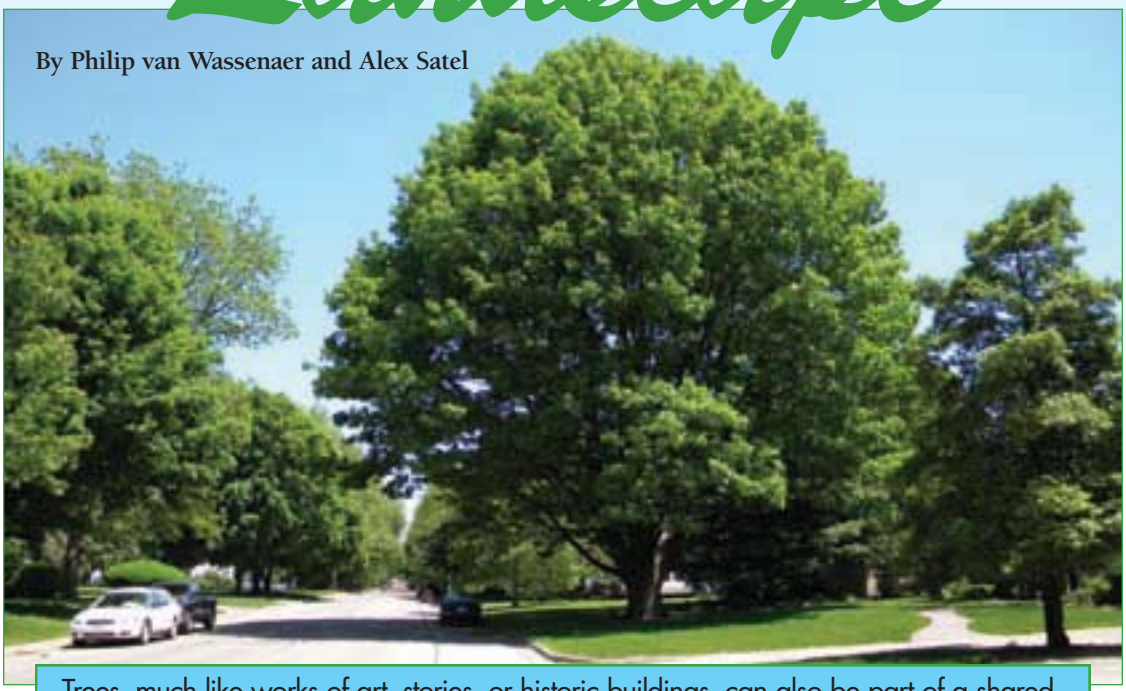
Maintaining Old Trees in the Human Landscape

By Philip van Wassenaer and Alex Satel



Trees, much like works of art, stories, or historic buildings, can also be part of a shared cultural, spiritual, and natural heritage. Therefore, trees deserve the same care and attention devoted to maintaining other heritage artifacts, especially as they enter old age.

For many people, trees are just another part of daily life.

While most rely on, and many even take for granted, the ecological benefits trees provide every day, human interaction with trees is often limited. From time to time, many people may rake up leaves or prune a few branches. Fewer may plant a tree at some point in their lives. But still fewer realize that trees, like works of art, stories, or historic buildings, can also be part of a shared cultural, spiritual, and natural heritage. Therefore, trees deserve the same care and attention that is devoted to maintaining other heritage artifacts, especially as they enter old age. This article explores how trees can become important heritage artifacts, why maintaining heritage trees is important, and what strategies can be implemented to assess and maintain such trees for the benefit of current and future generations.

In recent years, several groups and individuals have proposed definitions of what a heritage tree might be. Some relation to a historic person, event, or period; outstanding specimen characteristic; significant landmark function; or numerous other attributes may contribute to the heritage value of an individual tree or group of trees. Recently, Cecil Konijnendijk noted that trees in urban forests may help groups and individuals form a sense of identity, particularly in relation to a place they call home. Heritage trees also provide tangible links to places people once called home, or where others may call home in the future.

Trees and humans have shared the same landscapes for millennia. Over time, people learned to use trees for the benefits they directly

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provide. Through management systems such, as pollarding and coppicing, they developed *working trees* (a term coined by veteran tree researcher Ted Green) and used them for products, such as fuel wood, building materials, and even food. For thousands of years, such trees provided rural peoples with a livelihood and a reliable means to sustainably harvest everyday products and materials.

As times changed, people increasingly moved from the countryside into towns and cities, and in some locations the old management systems became impractical or unnecessary. The Industrial Revolution required coal to feed its steam engines, and so the traditional coppiced forests were largely abandoned. Pollarding, once a key means of preventing browsing by domestic animals, became largely reserved for formal gardens and street trees in industrializing areas. However, pollarding continues in many parts of Europe or has recently been restarted.

Rediscovering Heritage Trees

Arborists, foresters, and tree advocates in the United Kingdom eventually began to rediscover the ancient working trees dotting the landscape. Many were *escaped pollards* (also coined by Ted Green) or coppices, far too large to be workable, but reminiscent of the shape and low spreading growth form that once made them so valuable to rural people. Many of these trees were found in former royal preserves, while others could be found in hedgerows or regenerating forests. Many are very old for their species with some exceptional individual trees exceeding 1000 years of age. Such longevity was often made possible through past pollarding, which encouraged canopy rejuvenation and reduced static loading on trunks and branches. These management techniques also enabled pollarded veteran populations, often found as collections of open-grown trees, to become rich reserves of biological diversity for invertebrates and other saproxylic organisms (those dependent on decaying wood habitats).

Wherever they were found, these trees stood as monuments of times past. In 1993, a group called the Ancient Tree Forum began assembling to discuss these trees. By 1996, the group had launched the Veteran Tree Initiative (VTI), a collaborative effort by government agencies and nature conservation groups to develop a standard for the identification, assessment, management, and protection of these veteran heritage trees in the UK. The VTI identified thousands of such trees across the UK and in Europe, and perhaps more importantly, articulated the cultural and ecological importance of these trees in towns, cities, and the countryside.

Through their own work and that of other European researchers, veteran tree advocates have increased their knowledge of tree life stages. Many foresters and arborists still lack knowledge about how trees age and progress to their old or ancient life stages. In fact, many trees in the urban forest labeled as over-mature or senescent are routinely removed just as they begin reaching true middle age, when their habitat value is just beginning to increase. What causes these removals is a lack of understanding about the natural changes in tree physiology that take place as trees grow older. As part of these natural processes, larger limbs are shed, cavities develop, and many trees naturally begin a phase described as canopy reiteration or retrenchment, whereby they become shorter and wider as they economize on energy allocation and transport distances. As such, they may begin to slowly decline in scale from the top down, and lower sections may continue living for many more years. Effective management of veteran and heritage trees requires an understanding of these processes as natural survival strategies.

This knowledge of tree life phases is no longer new and uncertain; all arborists and urban foresters should become aware of the specific traits associated with aging trees, and begin to manage the human landscape in ways that protect and promote the many benefits old trees provide. For instance, Mats Jonsell, researcher at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, has found that veteran lindens (*Tilia* spp.) in urban Swedish parks contain levels of biodiversity comparable to or greater than their counterparts in natural forests. In North America, work by Steve Sillett at Humboldt University has shown that the oldest trees in redwood forests (*Sequoia sempervirens*) contain the greatest amount of biodiversity. This is precisely because of the many microhabitats found, characteristically in features correlating to those most often considered by arborists as structural defects. Such research highlights the importance of saproxylic (deadwood) habitats for a variety of species and the role of old trees as "arks of biodiversity" throughout long periods of time. Apart from their role in providing habitat, the greatest proportion of benefits, such as air quality improvement, stormwater retention, shading, and energy conservation, are typically provided by the largest trees in urban settings, because they have the greatest leaf area.

The challenge for responsible arborists is to sufficiently understand the structural tree features conventionally termed defects and to be able to make balanced judgments about their significance as habitat. In this way, tree owners can be appropriately informed about these attributes and their associated risks. This requires an evidence-based approach that avoids risk aversion, so that management decisions can be based on real risks

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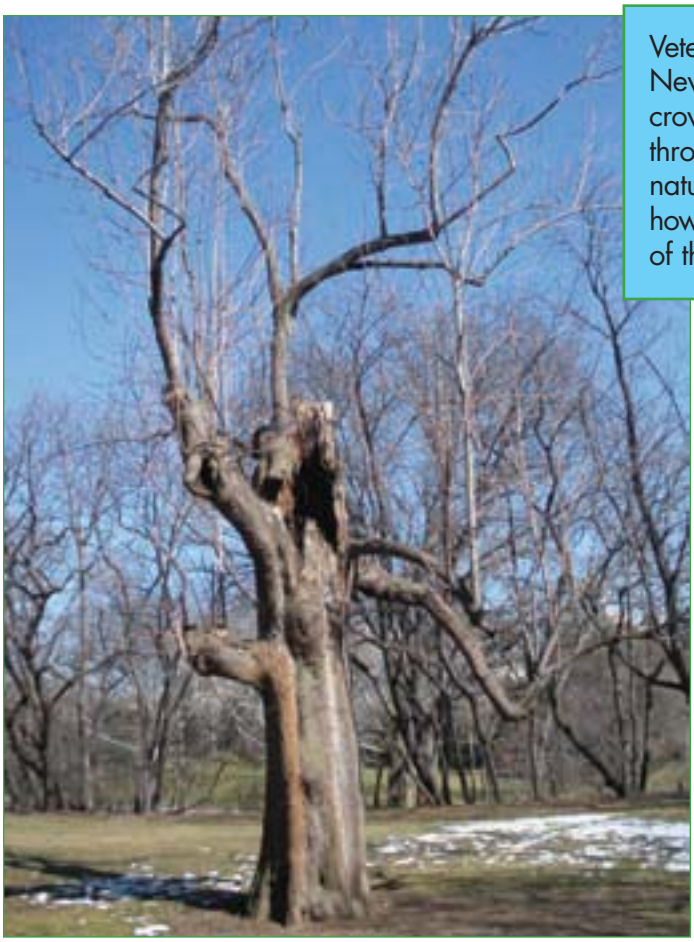
A veteran red oak (*Quercus rubra*) at Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Toronto, ON, Canada. Following a significant partial failure at the stem union, the large limb in the foreground has naturally propped itself and resumed vigorous upright growth. Another large lateral limb, in the background, is supported by an artificial prop. This is an example of conservation arboriculture practices that mimic natural processes and tree survival strategies.



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Veteran tulip poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) in Central Park, New York, NY. Following the loss of large parts of the upper crown (natural canopy retrenchment), the tree is surviving through reiterative growth on its remaining limbs. Observing natural strategies employed by these examples informs us of how to prune other veteran trees as they enter the ancient phases of their life spans.

and also account for tree decay response strategies, such as compartmentalization or compensatory adaptive growth. Inappropriate judgments about the body language of trees will likely result in substantial intervention, including major limb pruning or tree removal, possibly at the unnecessary expense of habitat and biodiversity values.

Managing Veteran Trees

British arboricultural consultant and veteran tree specialist Neville Fay identified 20 commonly found characteristics of veteran trees that many urban foresters and arborists would typically consider hazardous. Fay has also identified important ecological interactions of floral and faunal species dependent on each of these common defect characteristics. Considered alongside the work of Jonsell, Sillett, and many others, this suggests a responsibility for arborists to carefully consider the quality of habitat when assessing trees. The Specialist Survey Method devised by Fay and the VTI is an effective means to record and analyze these features at a tree population level.

The appreciation of the ecological interactions between characteristics of a defect and its habitat potential contributes to a more holistic perspective of tree inspection and management. This approach takes into account the risk and condition of trees, without undue reliance on defect-oriented methodologies. While the identification and assessment of the significance of defects is integral to tree risk assessment, it should not drive the entire tree management process at the expense of heritage and ecological values. Finding ways to assess these positive characteristics will lead to a more balanced and proportionate tree management approach that accounts for risk, while appropriately identifying important ecological and heritage values.

Fortunately, modern arboriculture has progressed well—especially in the field of tree risk assessment. Today, advanced assessment methodologies, such as tree radar, thermal imaging, sonic and electric impedance tomography, static load testing, and others, are available to experienced and progressive practitioners. These tools contribute to evidence-based tree risk assessment and can help arborists determine whether and how to invest in the retention of veteran trees in the human landscape. They are also supported by an ever-growing body of research and knowledge that allows new insights into tree biomechanics—particularly the effects of internal decay on strength loss and stability. In doing so, these methods can help support arboricultural prescriptions designed to maintain mature, veteran, and heritage trees in reasonably safe condition or can provide real justification when removal is deemed necessary.

A number of time-honored methods applied by arborists to reduce risk or promote tree longevity can also be applied to veteran trees, albeit sometimes in creative and novel ways. Dynamic cabling is one successful method of risk reduction, reducing the likelihood of stem failure while allowing the cabled tree to maintain some of the flexibility ►

necessary to stimulate the growth of reaction wood. Strong dynamic or static cables can also act as fail-safe devices for failure-prone limbs, catching them should they fracture. The likelihood of introducing decay is also significantly reduced, because dynamic cabling systems do not require drilling to install fixed anchoring points such as eye bolts. Another method is propping, which is used extensively in many parts of the world, but has not yet gained traction in North America. Props are not appropriate in all circumstances, but can be designed to carefully balance the needs of the tree with other important considerations, such as aesthetics.

Perhaps the most effective method of risk mitigation and veteran tree maintenance promoted by many veteran tree advocates is the practice of retrenchment pruning. This method seeks to replicate the natural aging process and involves directed pruning of the outer canopy to stimulate internal growth, sometimes even employing internodal heading cuts. These pruning techniques also reduce the wind sail area of a tree's crown and long lever arms, thereby reducing the overall risks associated with failure during significant loading events, such as wind or ice storms. Opponents of this methodology point out the commonly accepted consequences associated with topping: weak branch attachments, vigorous sprouting, and poor decay compartmentalization. Proponents maintain the view that the judicious application of such pruning methods forms are just one part of a long-term commitment to the tree, which must include a regular maintenance and monitoring regime.

The overall objective of a retrenchment maintenance program, which may be somewhat reminiscent of historical pollarding and coppicing techniques, is to maintain a reduced size and enable the long-term retention of the tree. Proponents of this methodology also contend that such measures cannot be applied across the board, but may be applicable for special cases, particularly among trees of high landscape, biodiversity, and heritage value when determined appropriate by arborists or others experienced in veteran tree management techniques.

The latter point highlights a simple truth underlying the entirety of conservation arboriculture and veteran tree management: it is still an evolving discipline, and the key to its success will be experience, innovation, experimentation, knowledge transfer, and adaptation. Those involved are playing a part in a new knowledge community. Veteran trees are survivors by nature and can considerably outlive our professional life spans. However, because mistakes can lead to irreplaceable loss, it is important that practitioner experience and contributions from other disciplines are shared. While some attempts to maintain veteran trees on the human landscape may fail, the benefits derived from the successes will far outweigh the costs. As arborists and urban foresters move towards a greater understanding of the life stages of aging trees, the benefits associated with their retention, and the tools and techniques for their management, future generations will reap the rewards of these living monuments to cultural and natural heritage.

Philip van Wassenaer, B.Sc. Environmental Sciences, Master of Forest Conservation, is the principal consultant for Urban Forest Innovations, Inc. He is an ISA Certified Arborist, member of ASCA, and a 2009 recipient of the True Professionals of Arboriculture Award.

Alex Satel is an ISA Certified Arborist and an urban forestry consultant with Urban Forest Innovations, Inc. He holds a Master of Forest Conservation degree from the University of Toronto and has experience in tree preservation, risk assessment, and strategic urban forest management planning.

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