

The Life and Times of Urban Trees

By Megan Hindmarch-Proud

In the mid-1800s, nearly 90% of Canadians lived in rural communities. Fast-forward and today 82% of us call urban centres home.¹ This reality is prompting more conversation about the health risks of urban living and ways to improve the quality of city life. Urban forestry—a term established at the University of Toronto more than 50 years ago²—is playing a growing part on both fronts.

In this country where there's an estimated 9,000 trees per person, do we really need to be concerned about the ones in our cities?³ From a variety of vantage points, the answer is yes. Early in school, we learn that trees provide us with vital oxygen. However, their urban role extends far beyond that and includes mitigating flooding, curtailing noise and dust levels, improving air and water quality, conserving energy, cooling rising city-centre heat, and



providing habitat and food for wildlife.⁴ Two recent studies show a clear link between nature and personal well-being—in fact, “having 10 more trees on your block can have self-reported health benefits akin to a \$10,000 salary raise or being seven years younger.”⁵

Across Canada, urban forests are challenged by extreme weather, urban development (both sprawl and increased density), disease and lack of genetic and species diversity.⁶ For example, too many Canadian cities have already experienced

the esthetic and financial costs of Dutch elm disease or the Emerald Ash Borer as swaths of trees have been wiped out.

Learning to successfully balance nature's needs and urbanization is an ongoing process and, in our busy lives, it's easy to take the backdrop of the urban forest for granted. However, across Canada there are increasing opportunities designed to help all of us help grow and nurture our cities' trees. After all: “The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now.” Chinese Proverb⁷

1. “Canada goes urban,” Statistics Canada, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-630-x/11-630-x2015004-eng.htm>.

2. “Canada's Urban Forestry Footprint,” Forestry News, January 24, 2018, University of Toronto, <http://forestry.utoronto.ca/canadas-urban-forestry-footprint-project>.

3. Gillian Findlay, “Trees are essential infrastructures in our towns and cities, say urban foresters,” CBC Radio, June 29, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/the-sunday-edition-july-1-2018-1.4723240>.

4. “The Benefits of Trees,” Tree Canada, <https://treecanada.ca/resources/benefits-of-trees>.

5. Michael Rosen, “Canada Needs a National Urban Forest Strategy,” *Huffington Post*, September 22, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/michael-rosen2/canada-urban-forest-strategy_b_8178338.html.

6. V. I. Lohr, D. Kendal, and C. Dobbs, “Urban trees worldwide have low species and genetic diversity, posing high risks of tree loss as stresses from climate change increase,” *Acta Horticulturae*, 10.17660/ActaHortic.2016.1108.34, https://www.actahort.org/books/1108/1108_34.htm.

7. Charles Liu, “Mandarin Monday: Learn Inspirational Chinese Proverbs Both Real and Fake,” *thebeijinger*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.thebeijinger.com/blog/2017/03/13/mandarin-monday-inspirational-chinese-proverbs>.

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