

The Importance of Being an Arborist: Preserving Trees for the Health of Our Planet

By Marc Welch, Deputy Commissioner/City Forester, Newton

Trees are a critical part of fighting the effects of climate change. They clean our air, provide oxygen, improve personal health, reduce pollutants, provide cooling, save energy, foster wildlife and biodiversity, and can even reduce crime. There may be no one single thing that does more for our environment than trees. Beyond this, trees link communities together, from residential neighborhoods to busy downtown areas, connecting neighborhoods, cultures, and generations. Trees are known to all. Everyone has a connection to trees, either directly or indirectly, whether they know it or not. Fostering trees, be they private or public, is incredibly important.

Caring for trees, promoting their importance, and demonstrating their value is the cornerstone of arboriculture. Arboriculture is the art and science of caring for, maintaining, and planting woody plants such as trees, shrubs, and woody vines. The science involves tree biology, tree growth, tree identification, learning to



A member of an arborist crew trims excess foliage.

recognize hundreds of insects and diseases, understanding a tree's structural dynamics, and assessing risk. There is also an art to managing individual trees. Each species of tree is unique and each tree within the population is unique. Understanding how to prune or where to place a tree based on unique characteristics requires understanding the surroundings and a feel for what "looks right."

Just like the many

different varieties of trees, there are many different careers in the tree care industry. One of the most in demand positions is working as an arborist. Arborists use science to properly care for and diagnose trees' needs and to artfully



Charles River foliage near Hemlock Gorge

prune, nurture, and place new trees into the landscape. Arborists do day-to-day field work, often as a member of a crew. This position allows a person to work outdoors every day, stay physically active and have an opportunity to see each day the work they have accomplished and how the work they do impacts our surroundings. An arborist working in the field is a skilled professional who must be physically fit and comfortable with heights. This career is an excellent opportunity for those who love to work outdoors and are comfortable with physical exertion in varying weather conditions.

There are many other ways to have a fulfilling career in the industry. There are positions as field technicians assessing trees and managing a tree healthcare program. People in this role use their learned skills to prevent problems, address insects and disease, and assess the need for fertilizing. Consulting arborists are highly qualified

specialists who work with clients to make decisions on proper protection during construction, evaluate risk, and make determinations on preservation. So being an arborist is also a great way to work with people.



Arborist crew members cleaning up

Not only are arborists critical for the care of private trees, but they also play a significant role in conserving, protecting, and caring for public trees. In fact, arboriculture in the Northeast

is rooted in the care of public trees. In 1895 botanist Dr. George E. Stone began lecturing about the importance of caring for trees, including trees along roadside edges. His lectures at the Massachusetts Agricultural College are the foundation from which the arboriculture industry and the management of public trees was born.

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An arborist tends to a dead limb.



Neighbors help plant trees on the berms of their street.



The first program for teaching arboriculture in the United States is still in existence today at what is now known as the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Dr. Stone taught the first courses on how to care for trees with a specific focus on public trees. These courses were taught to the nation's first state-mandated protectors of public trees, Massachusetts' local tree wardens. Annually towns and cities would send their tree wardens to learn about the latest techniques for caring for trees and how to address newly discovered insects and disease. These individuals formed the first organization in the country dedicated to the care and protection of public trees.

Today the importance of having qualified people care for and manage public trees has never been greater nor has the need been more important. Many municipalities, such as Newton, have made renewed commitments to managing their publicly owned trees. To do so, communities

are looking more at hiring their own staff arborists and contracting with outside contractors as well. Communities are recognizing how trees are an important part of the battle against climate change and therefore are looking to hire people in the arboriculture industry. Across the state many communities have openings for arborists and tree care workers. Many private companies have openings on crews that will directly be working to preserve public trees.

With renewed interest in preserving public trees and protecting and preserving private trees the demand for arborists in all types of roles has never been greater. At the same time the number of individuals entering the profession is shrinking. People completing an education in arboriculture and urban forestry have a 100% placement rate into the field. For an individual looking to work as an arborist on a field crew, there are often 20 to 30 positions available per graduate leaving school. In the private sector it is not uncommon to see job postings for positions with salaries in the six-figures. The field of arboriculture, especially the care of public trees, provides a unique opportunity to make a direct positive impact on the environment, to work outdoors, and to produce results that last for generations. ♦

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