

ETF News

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NEWSLETTER OF THE EUGENE TREE FOUNDATION

Planting Trees in Straight Lines: Is It the Law?

By Whitey Lueck

Following a recent tour of the new John E. Jaqua Academic Center on the University of Oregon campus, the young guide made some concluding remarks about the building's design, and thanked all of us visitors for coming.

We were standing once again by the front doors, where the tour had begun, and I asked her, "But what about the new landscape outside? Aren't you going to tell us about that?" No, she said, she hadn't been told by her supervisors to say anything about it.

Drat! Once outside, I had wanted to ask her if she knew why most of the new trees were planted in straight lines of a single species, and all the trees within each line were evenly spaced. I know she wouldn't have had an answer, except perhaps, "Well, that's just how trees are supposed to be planted."

No, it is not. Although straight lines of evenly spaced trees of a single species may have their place—at the Palace of Versailles outside of Paris, for example—it is only one of many planting design options. So why do we see it virtually everywhere on commercial and institutional properties?

Look across the street from the Jaqua Center at the new Arena. Although ample green space was provided around the building, all the trees are lined up once again. And, despite the large planting area, only two species are used: columnar European hornbeam and green ash. (And why no trees native to the Willamette Valley? The Arena landscape doesn't say *anything* about Eugene, Oregon; it could just as well be in Denver or Boston. Ugh!)

Elsewhere around the community, it's the



Photo by Whitey Lueck

A very straight row of birches planted outside the new Jaqua Center on the University of Oregon campus.

same story. Parking lots, schools, the Hult Center. Look at the drawings for Lane Community College's new building across from the Eugene Public Library: more green blobs

lined up like soldiers on parade.

Thankfully, the landscape architect for the new Wayne L. Morse United States Courthouse decided to mass trees in a somewhat more "natural" arrangement, at least on the west and north sides of the building, where scores of native incense-cedar and European beech (and a few aspens) were planted to provide a buffer to the unattractive and noisy Ferry Street Bridge viaduct just to the west of the building. But elsewhere—on the building's east and south sides—it's the same old story of single species plantings, evenly spaced, and usually in straight lines.

So much in our cities is rigid and rectilinear: building façades, utility lines, curbs, sidewalks. Why can't the trees at least be planted in such a way that they soften that rectilinearity rather than add to it? It is not difficult to do, and it would make the lives of the designers and architects a bit more interesting. As a designer myself, I am aware that the design of more informal, "naturalistic" plantings takes more time and thought than conventional cookie-cutter design. But I find the work very satisfying. Did I study landscape design to plant trees only in straight rows? Surely not.

One landscape architect tells me that he specifies plants to be in rows of the same species

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Summer, 2011; Vol. 14, No.3

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President's Column

As I write this in mid-July, an inch of rain has cleared the air and the grass pollen season has finally ended. Eugene Tree Foundation volunteers are busy watering, weeding, mulching, and pruning trees, and planning for an exciting 2011-2012 planting season. Big changes are in the works to increase the work we do to plant and care for trees and our urban ecosystems.

Friends of Trees Eugene

ETF continues to move closer to becoming Friends of Trees Eugene, the southern Willamette Valley field office of one of the most effective tree groups in the country. I am very grateful to the Meyer Memorial Trust, which recently awarded Friends of Trees \$25,000 through its Grassroots Grants



program to support the partnership of ETF and FOT. The funds will be used for FOT Eugene volunteer trainings, to develop a new strategic plan, and to support a Eugene office program director. I recently gave a presentation on ETF to the board and staff of Friends of Trees at their annual retreat. Everyone had ideas of how to help us become a more effective organization. I can't tell you how exciting it is to have the support of FOT's amazing staff. With their help, we will rapidly expand our capacity to mobilize volunteers working to build a thriving urban forest in Eugene and Springfield. And there is a great need for this work.

Urban tree cover has declined in much of the United States over the last 25 years. According to research on urban forests in North America by *American Forests*, the basic trend in North American cities is an increase in population and development and

a decline in tree cover. Portland, however, seems to be an exception to this trend. Research at Portland State University found that Portland's urban tree canopy has been stable or slowly increasing over the last 30 years, and is currently at about 26%.

I have been personally inspired by the work of Friends of Trees to increase forest cover in Portland. While visiting family in southeast Portland over the last four years, I have walked extensively through several nearby neighborhoods. I saw an amazing number of new trees with Friends of Trees tags. In a detailed study of urban canopy cover, PSU researchers documented a "Friends of Trees effect" in the inner southeast of Portland, connecting significant increases in canopy cover with FOT planting efforts. FOT has planted over 400,000 trees and shrubs in the Portland metro area. I hope we can create a similar "Friends of Trees effect" here in Eugene-Springfield.

Canopy Cover

Canopy cover is increasingly used as a measure of the status of urban forests in North America. *American Forests* recommends a goal of 40% canopy cover for metro areas in the Pacific Northwest. Cities across North America are measuring their canopy cover, making goals for the future, and initiating tree planting campaigns to meet their goals. For example, Seattle's goal is to increase their canopy cover to 30% over 30 years. Toronto is seeking to double their canopy cover from 17 to 34%. Miami is trying to reach 30% by 2017.

Canopy cover is a valuable but coarse measure of an urban forest. It is a useful part of a larger analysis that looks at health, age class, species composition, stocking rates along streets, and other measures. Hopefully, it will never substitute for time spent in the field observing.

Canopy cover is especially useful as we think of using trees to slow pulses of stormwater, save energy, and to cool and shade our cities as a response to a warming climate. Trees are increasingly valued as "capital assets" and are seen as "green infrastructure" that reduces the need for costly stormwater facilities and other "gray" infrastructure.

For instance, an *American Forests* study estimated that Eugene's trees annually provide stormwater benefits of nearly one million dollars and remove nearly 400,000 pounds of pollutants from Eugene's air. As with any asset, trees require maintenance to provide the most benefits, and we need to invest in their maintenance to get the most from them. Generating canopy cover data for our area may help us prioritize areas in greater need of planting, and help establish a baseline to measure progress toward goals for the future.

Unfortunately, we don't have canopy cover data for Eugene-Springfield. ETF is taking several approaches to obtain data for our metro area and our neighborhoods. For example, we are engaging local cartography students and teachers to help collect and evaluate data. ETF is looking at the way Portland and other cities organize volunteers to collect street tree inventory data. This summer, ETF is assessing the urban forest of Eugene and Springfield using the free software called *I-tree Canopy* that was developed by the USDA Forest Service. Preliminary findings using *I-tree* give a canopy cover level of 29% for Eugene and 23% for Springfield; and for specific Eugene neighborhoods, a 28% canopy cover for Jefferson Westside neighborhood and 13% for Bethel-Danebo.

Planting trees and properly caring for them is one of the most cost-effective actions we can take to improve our cities. Trees are relatively cheap to plant and maintain and provide uncounted ecological, economic, personal, and spiritual benefits. I'm truly excited to be learning from Friends of Trees to build better programs that will help us get many more people in Eugene and Springfield involved in events that bring people together, teach people about trees and stewardship, and are a lot of fun. Many great opportunities are coming up soon. In September, we will host an orientation to our new volunteer programs. In October, we will have our first training of Crew Leaders, and then planting season begins!

Erik Burke

Erik Burke, ETF President

The Other Trees

By Alby Thoumsin

Something important is missing in the street-side component of our urban forest. Despite its growing diversity in terms of shade trees, there is a striking absence of evergreen conifers.

I sometimes struggle to find a suitable subject for my education articles. This time, all it took was a walk by the corner of Washington Street and West 12th Avenue to get the idea. That intersection is blessed by the presence of several coast redwoods—the tallest-growing tree species in the northern hemisphere!

After that, I began looking for neighborhoods with large street-side conifers, but I could find very few. There are some Douglas-firs along West 11th Avenue, and our favorite “Heritage Tree” ponderosa pine at the corner of East 11th Avenue and Patterson Street, but for the most part, conifers are few and far between and, except for ETF plantings, there are very few trees younger than twenty years of age.

When I checked the City of Eugene’s *Approved Street Tree List*, I was surprised to see that only ten of 76 approved species are evergreen conifers. Why is that? Why can’t we plant more of these trees that give a Pacific Northwest signature to our streets?

In order to plant any of the ten approved conifers, the tree needs to be approved by the Urban Forester, the street-side park strip needs to be at least twenty feet (!) wide, and trees will be approved only on one particular soil type. No wonder there is a lack of conifers in town as few sites can meet these stringent criteria. When I have conversed about trees with City officials over the years, I always hear that the reluctance to plant conifers is also due to potential hazard (that fear of tall trees...), increased maintenance for sidewalks, and possible interference (especially when they are young, before they can be limbed up) with traffic visibility. In short, I always get the impression that conifers are not welcome in our community.

I beg to differ. I think that more

conifers should be planted for the following reasons. As I mentioned above, they give a classic Pacific Northwest flavor to our streets—especially if we plant local trees such as Douglas-firs, valley ponderosa pines, and incense-cedars. They usually live longer than broad-leaved trees. They attract a lot of wildlife and are even more effective when planted in groups. (A few years back, I had the pleasure of spotting a peregrine falcon on top of a Douglas-fir at West 18th Avenue and Jefferson Street!) Because our rainy season is in winter and early spring, evergreen conifers continue to effectively reduce storm water runoff—by holding a lot of water in their dense canopies—while their deciduous cousins are bare and provide few storm water benefits. Aren’t these all good reasons to increase the number of conifers in our street-side plantings?

However, we do need to remember a few things. It is true that, when planted in poorly drained soils, surface roots will disturb any hard surface (e.g. sidewalks) and if planted too close to an intersection corner, they can create a visual obstruction while young—and reduce traffic speed, too, but that’s just my opinion!—but I’m sure we could accommodate those minor drawbacks if we really put our minds to it.

Look at the ponderosa pine at East 11th and Patterson: the park strip there is perhaps five feet wide and there is no damage to the sidewalk, largely because the soil in that neighborhood is deep and well drained, so tree roots don’t grow just in the soil’s surface layers. The ponderosa pine is also a conifer that is less prone to wind-throw than Douglas-fir—because of its more open canopy that lets more wind sail through it—making it, I think, a great candidate.

One of the best “conifer success stories” in our community can be seen at the Chambers Overpass, where the City planted conifers on both the east and west slopes of the overpass—after a planting of non-native trees and English ivy (!) had failed to take hold—and then ETF along with the City planted scores of conifers between the railroad tracks and the south end of the Northwest Expressway. Wow!

How about planting conifers in



The ponderosa pine at East 11th and Patterson is one of ETF’s Legacy Trees.

other wide-open areas such as where West Sixth and West Seventh avenues merge into Highway 99? There, it’s just grass (talk about high maintenance!) and a few elms that I planted in 1993 as a private contractor. Wouldn’t you rather see giant sequoias, incense-cedars, and Douglas-firs? There is another large triangle of grass—that is constantly mowed—where East 11th Avenue meets Franklin Boulevard....

I know we can do better than this. It is true that the City has planted more conifers in recent years—largely due to the constant push from ETF—and we need to recognize the effort made by both organizations. If only the now-recognized benefits of these young conifers would trigger the desire to plant more of them!

My tip this time? If site conditions on your property meet the needs for conifers, consider planting them mostly on the north side of your house so they won’t shade your house in winter when you need all of the vitamin D you can get!

Until next time,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Alby". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping tail on the letter 'y'.

Alby Thoumsin is a certified arborist.



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so that they are easier to count when verifying that the contractor doing the landscape installation planted the requisite number of each species. I thought he was joking! (He was not.) I'm hopeful that this article will spur other designers to present me and ETF with more defensible reasons (if there are any) for continuing this style of planting.

What are some alternatives to linear plantings? Even if the space allotted for trees is long and relatively narrow—which, curiously, is frequently the case—one can cluster trees of one species in part of the planting, choose a second species with different spacing elsewhere in the planting, etc. God never decreed that all trees must be planted twenty or thirty feet apart. In fact, He sometimes plants them Himself three feet or eighteen feet and three and a half inches apart. We can do the same, and the result, like most of wild Nature, is likely to be very pleasing to the eye.



Photo by Whitney Lueck

Not only are the trees here at the Arena planted in a straight line, but the shrubs are also lined up like soldiers standing at attention.

point of view, for ample rooting space—than many small beds, or narrow beds, or, worst of all, trees imprisoned by steel grates.

Most important, however, is that we bring to the attention of others, as often as possible,

All of us appreciate some predictability in our lives. But we're also grateful for little surprises. So it is when planting trees. Go ahead and plant four or five trees in a line in a narrow bed. But then, plant two more fairly close together and at a different angle, in a separate little bed—as if they “hopped out” of the main bed just to be different.

Better yet, encourage architects to design more ample space for trees around their buildings. One or several large beds are better—from the trees'

the idea that there is nothing *wrong* with planting straight lines of evenly spaced trees of a single species, it's just that there are so many *other* options! Why not make designers' lives—and those of the admiring public—a little more interesting by exercising some of those options now and then?

Whitney Lueck is a landscape designer and an adjunct instructor with the University of Oregon's Department of Landscape Architecture.