

# Trees in Newport – a working paper

Newport's recent Town Plan showed that 89% of residents want more trees and shrubs. Trees bring many benefits to a community, including:

- mitigating the 'greenhouse effect' by absorbing CO2 and producing oxygen
- supporting wildlife
- increasing health and well-being
- adding beauty to our environment

Trees are wonderful plants, and are hugely varied. We all enjoy them, in one form or another.

But in an urban setting they need to be managed, preferably in such a way that they don't appear to be managed. Trees are mostly long lived, can grow very tall, and have huge root structures.

Here are some of the issues we need to consider, in addition to cash, to enhance the environment for many years to come, set out by John Jenks, an experienced forester and member of Newport 21. These points are by no means exhaustive:

## 1. Tree life spans

Not all trees have the same life spans – that is the age of a mature tree. Some are very long lived, eg. oaks (say 100 to 200 years), whilst others reach maturity in a shortish time eg. birch (say 30 to 60 years). By maturity I mean the vigorous growth period, well before senescence sets in.

Most trees will live longer than most humans are aware of them being alive – a tree's life cycle is often considerably longer than ours. We need to take that into account when thinking about urban tree management. Long term plans are needed.

## 2. Tree "architecture"

Think about it – some trees grow up tall and straight (pine tree), others have branches everywhere (horse chestnut). Some have heavy branches (beech), others have wisps of branches (birch). Some have a profusion of heavy leaves (lime), whilst others have sparse delicate leaves (false acacia/robinia).

The distinction between a shrub and a tree for smaller types is not so distinct (is laurel a shrub or a small tree?). Some trees are naturally multi-stemmed, or can be 'encouraged' to be (eg. hazel), although most are not. 'Weeping' trees are often very attractive – many trees have also been bred to weep (eg. beech).

## 3. Colour

The leaves, bark, branches, flowers, and fruits of trees can be of many different colours. Some are bland whilst others are very colourful, some always stay the same (from year to year, or even throughout their life), whilst some can change dramatically (red oak - leaves). Evergreens are what they say, whilst deciduous trees reveal a different structure during winter.

Colourful flowers can result in colourful fruits (cherry), but not necessarily (magnolia).

## 4. Tree roots

Some have tap roots growing very deep, whilst others are shallow rooted. Some actively seek out water (willow, alders), others survive without too much. Tree roots are said to reach out at least to the extent of the tips of the branches, and can be massive structures.

Tree roots can make a real mess of a wall or drain. But conversely they can hold the soil together on banks.

## 5. Health & Safety

Trees, or parts of trees, can be poisonous – yew and laburnum are the best known. Some trees are notorious for dropping their branches without warning (eg. horse chestnut).

Some have spines (hawthorn), others have sharp needles (eg. monkey puzzle).

All forest trees can make a real mess of a car, or house, or human.

Presumably the council has some kind of responsibility for trees in private gardens – at least at the point when they fall into the street. Some trees, I would say, are not appropriate for an urban area – I have seen monkey puzzle trees in London of about 100 ft or more, and 3 people couldn't stretch round the trunk. It might not be popular, but maybe certain trees / tree growth should be restricted in some way?

## 6. Selecting trees for planting

A dog is for life, not just . . .

A tree is for more than one lifetime – so choose carefully. What do we want to achieve, not just for the next two or three years, not even for the next 20 years, but for the next 50 to 200 years?

So selecting not only the species to plant, but its planting position, is very important – how will this tree look in 50 years time, what space will it occupy, what space will its roots occupy?

Some places lend themselves to urban tree cover (eg. St Nicholas churchyard), whilst others are not so good (eg. High Street between Barclays & Wellington Road).

Some trees are great street trees (specially bred hornbeam), others are a disaster waiting to happen (forest beech trees).

## 7. Tree maintenance

There is no such thing as a 'no maintenance tree'!

How can we minimise maintenance needs? Select trees that won't require much (not too many leaves to rake up, doesn't need pruning frequently, don't plant too many trees, how about slow growing small trees, etc). Some larger trees can be kept small by pruning, eg pollarded limes (St Nicks). Coppicing and other techniques are possible, but at what cost? Keep a good eye on trees throughout their life – we don't necessarily need to prune, or whatever, every year, or even every 5 or 10 years, but we do need to be aware of what is happening. And above all, replace the trees **well before** they go into old age.

## 8. Have a long term plan

This is the key.

Say we require tree cover of 10 trees in a certain area that doesn't have trees on it already – just plant 5. Fill the other spaces with shrubs, or bedding plants, or whatever. Say we expect the trees to last 100 years. At around year 70 plant the other 5. Then when we need to cut down the initial planting, we will have new trees already at a good size – the resulting change to the landscape will be minimal. Certainly compared to the famine & feast of planting everything up, and then having to replant in one go. The pressure to retain some of the trees will cost us very dear in trying to keep on old trees into their senescence, and they won't look so pretty at that age anyway. So planning ahead is essential.

## 9. End Result

Trees are a really important part of any landscape, including the urban landscape. Without them life would be very drab indeed.

We have a great opportunity to enhance the lives of Newport for generations to come by selecting now trees that will enhance the fine architecture, and the not so pleasant, enabling the town to breathe and provide some wildlife habitats.

## Proposal

In 1987 members of Newport Civic Society and Shropshire Wildlife Trust undertook a comprehensive tree survey in Newport, dividing the town into five sectors and reporting on the species, location, condition and possible risks of trees (excluding smaller, easily replaced trees and most conifers). It is not clear whether any long-term tree plan was developed as a result of this detailed survey.

More recently, in the last few years, over 1,000 young trees have been planted in Newport and Church Aston by Heart of England in Bloom together with Newport 21, Scouts and other local groups, with the advice of Telford and Wrekin's Tree Officer, Adrian Corney. But there has been no overall long-term plan for future tree-planting and landscaping that we are aware of.

Our proposal is that Newport Town Council, together with Church Aston Parish Council, should sponsor a Long-term Tree Plan for the town. This will involve:

- an updated tree survey carried out by people (preferably local) with the necessary expertise
- funding, including grant applications to various sources, to enable the survey, initial planting and ongoing maintenance
- requiring appropriate tree and shrub provision as an essential element in all new housing proposals
- using the above paper as a checklist of criteria to inform planning, ensuring that consideration is given to tree life-spans, tree architecture, colour, tree roots, health and safety, tree selection (including native species, locally grown), and maintenance.

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