

Newport struggles to keep aging trees alive

By FLO JONIC (2012-01-05)

PROVIDENCE, RI (WRNI) - Newport is best known for the gilded era mansions that line Bellevue Avenue. But imagine these magnificent estates without the towering trees that surround them. A combination of old age and disease is threatening these trees and desperate measures are being taken to save them.

On a chilly morning in December, arborist Reggie Chaney wielded a machine that blew a strong blast of air into the earth. Dirt flew as he loosened the root ball of a more than one hundred year old copper beech in front of Rosecliff, one of the mansions on Newport's Bellevue Avenue. The 80-foot tree is already infected with an algae that will eventually kill it. Root invigoration is an attempt to buy more time.

Chris Fletcher of Bartlett Tree Experts says the air blast tool, which was invented by the military to detect land mines, is relatively new to the forestry industry.

"We've only had this tool about eight years," says Fletcher "and it used to be that we would mulch and do everything we could do but we couldn't till the soil and it would take three to five years to get an effect on the tree. With this process we get an effect - new leaf growth - usually within about a year to two years which makes a big difference to saving the tree."

Despite these heroic measures, Newport is losing many of the trees that soften the lines of its magnificent mansions. At greatest risk are the beeches, which Gilded Age industrialists imported from Europe in the second half of the 19th century. They were favored for their magnificent red or green foliage and dense shade canopy. But they're reaching the end of their natural lives says Jeff Curtis, grounds manager for the Preservation Society of Newport County.

"The way I look at it, we all have our lifespans," says Fletcher with resignation in his voice. "No matter how well we take care of these trees they're going to die. And that's the one thing that we have to explain to people. Eventually they're going to go. Their average lifespan is 100 to 125 years and this is where we're at now."

Old age has made the beeches vulnerable to phytophthora, an algae which causes bleeding cankers that destroy the trees' circulatory systems. Newport tree warden Scott Wheeler says 45 of the 152 copper beeches inventoried a few years ago have died.

"So that's 30 percent in about four years. So that's a lot. And these trees are so large they make such an impact in the landscape. When they disappear, when they die, it just changes the aesthetic, particularly along Bellevue Avenue," says Wheeler. "Where previously you had a large house or estate that was at least partially screened all of a sudden it's completely wide open. So it's drastic. It has a big visual impact."

Re-planting efforts have been underway for about 20 years. But it didn't start nearly soon enough or, as Wheeler puts it:

"I often say it's kind of like waiting until you're about to go into the nursing home to think about having kids. You've missed a few generations," Wheeler says. "So even though we've been actively re-planting when you take down a tree that's 70 feet tall and 70 feet wide and replace it with one that's seven feet tall you've got a lot of time to make up."

Disease and old age aren't the beech trees' only enemies. Tourists walking on their fragile, shallow roots have also taken their toll, not to mention the practice of parking under them for their cooling shade.

If you are lucky enough to have one of Newport's famed beeches, city officials say you should make sure it gets plenty of water, is protected from hot sun with another tree planting on its south side and has a layer of mulch on its roots.

Do you have insight or expertise on this topic? Please email us, we'd like to hear from you.

news@wrni.org.

© Copyright 2012, [WRNI](http://www.wrni.org)