

THE DOWNTOWN FOREST PEOPLE

GRASSROOTS ALBANY

We're a group of neighbours on a few blocks in downtown Toronto. Twenty years ago, when the current slogan was "think gobally, act locally", we started meeting monthly at one of our houses to find ways of acting on our local environment, and to share cups of tea or glasses of wine (being strong believers in the social aspects of joint action). Early actions included things not yet done municipally, like fine paper recycling, collecting toxic materials for safe disposal, obtaining and distributing reusable shopping bags, presenting composting workshops, and we started an annual plantsale with roots from our gardens. But it was looking at the trees that showed us where best to act.

Our goal was to change the way people think, to foster the idea that human beings are part of a larger community – part of an ecosystem.

LIVING IN A FOREST

Our neighbourhood is very well treed, but many of the trees are a century old, and every spring we heard the chain saws at work. We decided to look into the health of our forest, and so we hired a young forester, Marshall Buchanan to identify and assess our local forest.

Over the summer of 1992 he looked at the 1,590 trees in a small 8-block area, and together we published the results as *The Albany Neighbourhood Forest*. The report told us our soil was deep and fertile and our trees were mostly healthy, but that they faced serious problems:

- Insufficient species diversity made the forest vulnerable to disease.
- Many front yard trees were reaching the end of their lives, and parking pads meant they were not being replaced as they came down.
- There is a 50-year age gap between the first plantings when the houses were built and the next city plantings.

This was the first inventory of urban trees on private as well as public land. We discovered that 70% of the trees in our forest are privately owned. Stewardship of the forest is in the hands of the community.

TAKING ACTION

We began longterm work on improving, restoring, and augmenting the neighbourhood forest.

- We worked with the city Forestry Department to focus front yard species towards high-canopy native trees, so as to increase diversity while maintaining the character of the neighbourhood. We participated in two separate front yard planting projects.

- With the volunteer help of a group of dedicated professionals called the Ecological Resource Group (ERG) we held a three-year back garden naturalization project called Over The Fence. Sixty or more families participated, a hundred trees were planted, and many more native shrubs, vines, and perennials.
- We developed a preferred list of arborists and foresters, a reference library available to the neighbours, and contributed money towards the care of heritage trees.
- We have continued to offer trees, advice, encouragement, and information in a series of festivals, plantings, prunings and removals. And we have spread the word to other neighbourhood groups.

CHECKING THE OUTCOME

Twelve years later we hired another forester, Melanie Gentles, to do a second inventory and find out how our forest was doing. Our second report, *Return to the Forest*, brought us very good news:

- Our trees remain in good health, and fewer have gone down than expected.
- Their number has increased by almost 300.
- Their diversity has increased quite markedly, with improvements in native species and conifers.
- Though there's nothing we can do about that 50-year age gap, we are ensuring another one doesn't occur on our watch.

This news came at a time (2004) when overall the Toronto canopy is reported to be in severe decline.

The community can be effective in caring for the urban forest, especially when professional assistance is readily available.

LARGER BENEFITS

The Albany Neighbourhood Forest has benefited from the work of local residents over the past 15 years. But there have been great benefits for the community as well. Information from the two reports has alerted the neighbourhood to the forest around Trees are bigger and older than us, they outlive us, outreaching us in time as well as space. They form our connection with the wider world we inhabit, the world we depend on for water, air, and sustenance. That this change has taken place in our community, in spite of people moving in and out, in spite of the alterations, renovations and additions constantly underway in our downtown area, is made clear by a number of observable changes:

- There is a continuing interest in and concern for trees – not that they should be taken down but that they should be maintained and added to. Our most recent back yard tree plant could have placed 50+ trees had the money not run out. As it was we planted 41.
- The small local parks are well cared for, planted by volunteers, and fiercely defended.

- Traffic concerns gave rise to a block reversal so that the streets could belong to the residents, not to those snatching rapid shortcuts on their way elsewhere.
- Garden chemicals have been effectively banned in the area for many years by means of neighbours' disapproval.
- Garden composting is common.
- Garbage and recycling is very well attended to.
- Front yards are now mostly planted rather than grassed.
- Our 4-year Return of the Toad project found twelve ponds and more temporary havens for toad spawn.
- Downspout disconnection is the norm in this area.
- Native plants are visible everywhere.
- Cats are mostly belled, to protect the birds, and there's email and street exchange of local seasonal bird sightings – warblers during the migrations, hawks through the winter.
- A little tree nursery has started to propagate the heritage trees in the neighbourhood.

Stewardship leads to a broader understanding of how to keep ourselves and our world healthy. And it brings us together as friends and neighbours in the forest