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BIG CITY

For Urban Tree Planters, Concrete Is the Easy Part

By [SUSAN DOMINUS](#)

Arthur Simpson, a professional forester, always thought that everyone likes a tree.

Then he moved to New York.

“It’s not unusual for people to say they don’t want it,” said Mr. Simpson, the “it” referring to whatever tree the city has resolved to plant in a swatch of sidewalk or other public space. Mr. Simpson is privy to some of those objections because he works for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, one of 40 or so foresters helping to execute Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#)’s million-tree initiative, a plan the mayor announced (one year ago this week) to blitz the city’s five boroughs with a million trees by the year 2017.

If you’re a forester perversely inclined to ply your trade in New York City, the initiative makes now a pretty good time to make a go of it. The city hired 24 foresters in the past year, a good majority of them hailing from places where trees are not exactly controversial. Mr. Simpson, 32, lived and worked in the open spaces of Montana, Oregon and, most recently, Arizona, before hitting it off with a New York-based opera singer whom he met at a party. Now he lives in Queens.

All told, Mr. Simpson has adjusted well to his new urban habitat: He’s got some family in the area, and in the past year he’s even been to five operas, five more than he’d ever seen before moving to the city. A laid-back, fleece-wearing, barely shaven kind of guy, your typical central-casting kind of forester, Mr. Simpson has been really surprised by only one aspect of New York City life, and that’s the unwelcome reception he sometimes get at the site of an imminent tree-planting.

Sometimes the residents or homeowners are worried about their allergies (though the trees are intended to help alleviate asthma and allergy rates citywide); sometimes they’re worried that a branch will fall on their car (a call to 311 will procure a free pruning). Sometimes they’re worried about the extensive construction required to plant a tree in a patch of concrete.

A few months back, Mr. Simpson, one of the foresters overseeing contractors in Manhattan, found himself in Harlem, trying to placate an elderly, elegantly suited gentleman who was concerned that the roots of the tree to be planted in front of his brownstone would penetrate an underground vault he’d built attached to his home. And all those leaves — wasn’t he going to be responsible for cleaning them up? (That would be yes.) And could he be fined if he didn’t? (Theoretically yes, but the city intercedes in only the most egregious cases.)

The homeowner was so incensed, he cut out a piece of cardboard to protect his clothes, placed it in the pit that had been dug for the tree and planted himself firmly in the hole. Mr. Simpson made his favorite tree-loving arguments — they improve property values, they make the air cleaner, they keep houses cooler in

summer and warmer in winter — but nothing would persuade the man to leave.

The sit-in eventually disbanded after Bram Gunther, the city's deputy chief of forestry and horticulture, and William Castro, the Manhattan borough commissioner for the parks department, made a (rare) concession, agreeing that no tree would be planted there until further consideration.

For Mr. Simpson, it was an education in New York thinking. "It's O.K. if we ask for it, but you can't tell us we have to have it," he summarized.

So add tree publicist to the job experience of the New York forester, as well as other, more traditional urban foresters' tasks: choosing the species of tree appropriate for a space, checking and double-checking the width and depth of the pit, and whether it's far enough from fire hydrants, pipes and electrical wires.

Because this is New York, the job has required even a little bit of model management, as occurred the week before last, when "The Tyra Banks Show" decided its host should plant a tree as part of her campaign to do 500 good deeds. Mr. Simpson found Ms. Banks and her two "America's Next Top Model" sidekicks lovely, "but they didn't know how to use a shovel," he noted, as if that were a strange and unexpected insight. Because the timing of the filmed segment wouldn't allow for the time it takes to plant a tree according to code, "once they were gone, we dug it back up and planted it properly," Mr. Simpson said.

The pleasures of the job for him are numerous, among them the sense that he has "one of the few jobs that let you have a physical impact on the city of New York, the way it looks now, and the way it'll look in the future."

While his colleagues out West are roaming among the redwoods, Mr. Simpson is often looking for a parking space. But somehow, between the parks and the trees he sees every day, Mr. Simpson said, "I do feel very at home."

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