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The Greening of America

Ambitious Tree-Planting Programs Are Sprouting Up Nationwide

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LOS ANGELES -- Spurred by visions of their cities frying in a warmer world, mayors around the nation have grasped a green solution: *trees!* Like Johnny Appleseed, they have vowed to sow their seeds in great profusion, promising millions of new trees in the coming years. Arbor Day, that old fusty holiday, is getting a makeover.

Cities once planted trees because they were beautiful. Now trees are being retasked as "green infrastructure" managed by "urban foresters" to work as powerful energy-saving, carbon-sucking, wastewater-treating tools to save the planet. But as the mayors spin their green dreams, their releaf teams have had to confront a brutal reality: Planting a tree is a lot harder than it looks.

Urban tree farming can be a time-consuming, expensive and exasperating experience -- like children, trees require years of maintenance. Businesses complain about the cost, neighbors about the sap. Their roots are murder on sidewalks; their limbs tangle with power lines.

"The city sidewalk can be one of the most hostile environments for a young tree," a cramped cell of garbage soil surrounded by smothering asphalt, says Gregory McPherson, a scientist with the federal Center for Urban Forest Research. "A virtual conflict zone," as one arborist put it, beset by disease, pollution, drought, insects -- not to mention drunk drivers and staple guns and trip-and-fall lawsuits. "It's a tough life," sighs Marcia Bansley, executive director of Trees Atlanta. It's hard out there for a poplar.

Trees are the new potholes. On his first day in office, Los Angeles Mayor [Antonio Villaraigosa](#) helped pat moist mulch around a golden medallion sapling, the first in an audacious promise to transform this dense, dirty, dry city by planting 1 million new trees. That was almost three years ago. Lessons learned? "We have learned that a million is a really big number," says Nancy Sutley, a deputy mayor who oversees the mass reforestation project, which has experienced some serious growing pains.

Boston Mayor Thomas Menino last year promised to add 100,000 trees by 2020, a goal that sounds almost humble compared with those of his counterparts. Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels envisions a new tree for every man, woman and child in the city -- 649,000 maples, sweet gums and cherries over the next 30 years. Denver Mayor [John Hickenlooper](#), announcing his "Tree by Tree" project, is going for a million by 2025.

A million just has that aspirational ring.

Indeed, Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon is calling his bid "One Million Trees for One Million People." The state of Nebraska is shooting for a million in a decade. New Mexico recently unveiled its "Plant a Million More" campaign. The Sacramento region is betting it can add 5 million. Going global,

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the [United Nations](#) launched the Billion Tree Campaign. (Less numerically ambitious programs are underway in cities such as Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Indianapolis and Washington.)

Not to be outdone, on Earth Day last year Mayor [Michael Bloomberg](#) promised New Yorkers a million trees in 10 years. The cost of planting a single street tree in Manhattan? About \$1,000. Estimated cost of the urban reforestation project is \$600 million, annual maintenance not included. An early hurdle faced by New York? The city can't hire trained arborists fast enough.

Driving around Los Angeles in his [Prius](#) is Andy Lipkis, the founder of TreePeople, one of the nation's most experienced organizations of "citizen foresters," who is helping Mayor Villaraigosa reach his million mark. Lipkis points to shady boulevards lined with ficus trees and then to entire neighborhoods devoid of any shrubbery at all, and he confirms what satellite imagery tells us: Poor people don't have plants. The thinnest tree cover is, no surprise, over the city's most impoverished neighborhoods. Where ritzy Bel Air has 53 percent canopy coverage, gritty South Central has only 7 percent.

Nationwide, three dozen cities have lost a quarter of their tree canopy since 1972, according to the group American Forests, which discovered that America is missing 600 million trees, as our major metropolitan areas fade from green to gray. But here's the problem: The increased density of American cities means there is less room for trees to replace the missing. The same is true in the suburbs: All those new mini-mansions built to the edge of the property line don't have big yards.

When Los Angeles launched its "Million Trees LA" project, it was assumed there would be plenty of room, but as it turns out, "the space is actually quite tight," says McPherson, the scientist with the Forest Service who surveyed the city's bio-inventory with the help of aerial reconnaissance and computer algorithms. McPherson found just 1.3 million spots to "realistically" plant in Los Angeles, most in the yards of private homes.

New York faces a similar squeeze. Bloomberg plans 220,000 trees along city streets, which essentially means "a tree in every single place where it is possible to plant a street tree," Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff told the [Associated Press](#). Another 380,000 trees will be planted in parks and shoehorned onto traffic medians, and the remaining 400,000 will be the responsibility of community organizations, businesses, cooperatives, developers and any New Yorker with a patch of dirt and a shovel.

Treewise, "Washington is in pretty good shape," says Mark Buscaino, executive director of Casey Trees, a community group that helped plant 1,500 trees in the city last year. Canopy cover in Washington is a nice, leafy, green 35 percent, he says, and per capita the city spends more than New York or Los Angeles on its forest, which includes about 120,000 street trees.

To the community of activist-arborists, a tree is really so much more. Trees ease stress, fight cancer, lower crime, build civility, store water, bolster real estate prices, etc. They exhale oxygen, inhale carbon dioxide. Yet while the mayors stress the importance of trees in the fight against global warming, their ability to sequester heat-trapping greenhouse gases is not that super-duper.

Consider: There are 1.9 million trees in Washington, a mature urban forest that in a single year absorbs the amount of carbon dioxide emitted from the tailpipes of 9,700 cars, according to David Nowak, a research scientist with the Forest Service. So planting a million new trees is a drop in the bucket, especially in a city such as Los Angeles, where there are 5.2 million vehicles registered in the county. Actually, the greatest benefit of trees is shade, which reduces energy use in the summer.

But everybody likes trees, right? Apparently, no. According to the community tree planters toiling on

the streets, businesses don't like trees (when foliage blocks signage). Bureaucrats don't like trees (because they're a hassle). And despite what they say now, politicians have not been tree huggers. The first item cut in any tight budget year is usually tree maintenance. "When you say, 'What's the cost of a tree?' it is more than buying a tree and putting it in the ground. It's also taking care of it," says Ray Tretheway, executive director of the Sacramento Tree Foundation, who explains it takes two or three years for a tree to establish a home.

Here's a great idea: free trees. Los Angeles has sponsored hundreds of "tree adoptions." But what happens when the saplings go home? "When *we* plant street trees, we make sure the soil is amended, we stake them, tie them, mulch and add nutrients. We have people committed to watering them," says Dore Burry, the environmental services manager with the Koreatown Youth and Community Center, which has planted 2,600 street trees for Million Trees LA. "When you give away free trees, we have very little assurance of high survivorship."

Especially, when cities give away small, vulnerable six-inch seedlings in bags or tubes -- the kind of tree offered today, on Arbor Day, around the country. Many arborists now urge cities not to distribute free seedlings for fear the green swag just ends up in the trash. Los Angeles recently stopped the practice.

Planting street trees often requires both a city permit and the permission of neighbors, who give many reasons for not wanting a tree at the curb. They don't like dogs, who do like trees. Tree activists have heard people complain about sap, birds, squirrels, spiders, leaves and shade. Oh, and they don't want their views blocked.

Burry explains that neighborhoods with the fewest trees are the toughest places to plant. "These are often the harshest environments, communities on the bad side of environmental justice issues -- lots of renters, working class, two-job individuals. For us it is much more costly." Burry says it takes intense community outreach -- many meetings, much door knocking, to get neighbors to agree to plant and care for new trees. Then: "Sometimes there has been no organic life on the street in 20 years. The soil is extremely dry, nutrient-poor, compacted. We have to pour gallons and gallons of water and just let it sit, and still sometimes you dig and it's like concrete. This loud clang." Other challenges? "They don't have water hoses," Burry says.

Trees in Los Angeles are tagged with gang graffiti. Vandalism is not uncommon. So is aggressive pruning by municipal trimmers, which can leave trees with severe, lethal haircuts ("trim more than 30 percent of a pine and you've killed it," Lipkis says). Certain species of trees planted beneath street lamps can fry themselves out by attempting to photosynthesize 24 hours a day. The average life span of a street tree is seven years, because mortality is so high in the first few years.

Since the Million Trees LA program began, the city and its partners have added 141,357 trees to the urban biosphere. Or so they hope. Half of those trees were given away as seedlings or adoptions. It's anybody's guess whether they are still alive. Bottom line? Los Angeles can account for at least 70,000 new trees in parks, on streets, around schools and developments, which is many times more trees than they were planting before.

"It's ambitious, it's a very, very ambitious goal," says Larry Smith, executive director of North East Trees, one of the community groups working on the Million Trees LA project. "The reality of what it takes is settling in. We want a million trees but what we really want is healthy, mature, urban trees. We want trees we can take care of, not just numbers."

Says Lipkis: "The danger is that it becomes all about reaching a million," and that it becomes a public

relations play, and not a forest. "You could fly a helicopter over L.A. and dump out a million seeds, but that's not the point, is it?"

Staff writer Ashley Surdin contributed to this report.

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