

## SoMa tree fight makes its way to City Hall

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The latest skirmish in San Francisco's tree wars took place Aug. 25 in a City Hall hearing room. Department of Public Works hearing officer Frank Felice presided over a clash between developers who want to remove 22 mature southern magnolias (*Magnolia grandiflora*) from Harrison and Third streets and neighbors who want the trees preserved. The hearing featured an interesting attempt at greenwashing by the developers.

Lane Partners LLC of Menlo Park is renovating the old SBC building at 370 Third St. Corporate representative Mark Murray said the city required the company to either repair a quarter of the sidewalk fronting the building or replace the entire sidewalk. Concluding that magnolia roots had damaged the sidewalk, Lane Partners requested permission to take out all the trees and replace them with 24-inch box-size London plane trees, a sycamore species.

"The southern magnolia needs a tremendous amount of water and doesn't do well in this climate," Murray said. "At first glance, this might seem like the non-environmental approach. That might be the knee-jerk reaction when you don't look at the science of sustainability." He said Lane Partners aims to make the building green enough for LEED certification, and that "LEED awards points for changing species of plants to reduce water consumption."

### Standing up for magnolias

Murray said arborist Dorothy Abeyta, who did not appear at the meeting, had found all but one of the magnolias to be in poor condition. Roy Leggitt, another consulting arborist, supported the proposed replacement, describing the southern magnolia as a thirsty sidewalk-lifter. "The appearance of the property is also part of the equation," Leggitt said. "The replacement trees will not be southern magnolias if Lane Partners has anything to say about it."

Carla Short, from the city's Bureau of Urban Forestry, said only six of the magnolias were compromised enough by wounds, infection or structural problems to warrant removal. "We evaluate the trees themselves, in the absence of any proposed project," she said. "We try to preserve any tree we think is healthy and sustainable."

Neighbor Katherine Quinlan presented 140 signatures in support of the magnolias. "These trees have something no newly planted sycamores could ever have, and that's age and scale with the building," said Alice Rogers. "One of the first rules of sustainability is you don't get rid of anything old that works." Vikki

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Hart called London plane "a very dirty tree compared with magnolia."

She could have gone further: In his book "Allergy-Free Gardening," Thomas Ogren says sycamores "cause allergy everywhere they're cultivated." That's supported by peer-reviewed medical studies in France, Spain, Turkey and South Africa. Mike Sullivan, author of "Trees of San Francisco," considers the London plane one of the city's most overused trees.

Arborist and Urban Forestry Council member Jocelyn Cohen chastised developers who "come into the community with their own agenda and decide to clear-cut the urban forest." She said the proposed replacements would take years to establish and half might not survive: "An established forest gives the most environmental and social value."

Carolyn Blair of the San Francisco Tree Council concurred that the magnolias "would not be replaced with equal-value trees."

Felice pressed Murray on the LEED issue: "Do they take into account removal of trees?" Murray said that was his interpretation of the intent. But Short countered that the LEED standards "actually refer to replacing lawns with xeriscape." Murray also conceded that the magnolias already get along without supplemental water.

Felice said he'd release his decision on the fate of the 16 magnolias in a week or two.

### **Closer to home**

Events in our own backyard have sensitized us to tree ignorance, as the neighbors' landlady hired yet another guy with more horsepower than horse sense to butcher her formerly handsome flowering plum by our fence line. The pity is that people who mutilate trees for money seem not to understand that they don't know what they're doing.

They could easily get lessons, or books. One from Europe has arrived here: "How to Prune: Techniques and Tips for Every Plant and Season" by John Cushnie, a garden authority in Northern Ireland. One of the book's two problems is that some of it - climate and species matters, especially - doesn't align with our needs.

A bigger problem is with elementary pruning technique. On tools and twig cutting, Cushnie is great, but his instructions on twig cutting to keep the branch collar undamaged - one of the first things to know about pruning - are unclear; I'm not sure a first-time pruner would get a clue from them. A diagram or photo is sorely needed here.

I recommend the book to gardeners with unusual trees and shrubs. A third of the book is a directory to species and their preferences, and it seems on target here. Go by the scientific names, as some of our common names don't jibe with the Brits'. Gorgeous photographs, and instruction on occult practices like pleaching and pollarding.

### **Learning more about urban trees**

### **Citizen forester training**

**Friends of the Urban Forest's** six-week Citizen Forester training begins Sept. 18. Speakers include Mike Sullivan, arborist Ted Kipping and experienced FUFsters. Director Doug Wildman says the class is "aimed at persons wanting to know more about trees and urban forestry, and wanting to help street trees that we've planted." The training incorporates new information on tree biology and provides pruning recommendations for tree families and species.

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## Books

**"How to Prune: Techniques and Tips for Every Plant and Season,"** by John Cushnie. (Kyle Cathie Ltd.; 2007; \$34.95).

**"Tree Pruning Basics,"** by Alex Shigo. \$14 from Shigo and Trees, Associates LLC, [www.shigoandtrees.com](http://www.shigoandtrees.com).

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